Strandlines

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Strandlines

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Summary

It’s September 18, 2008. Castiel is being deployed to rescue Dean Winchester from Hell.

He lands in Dean Winchester’s motel room in 2003. Things go from there.

Notes

This is a birthday gift for Kasia. It got a tiny bit out of hand. And rather late. I hope you like it anyway. <3

Chapter 1

Save Dean Winchester.

Those are the words seared into Castiel's grace. His directive — the mission. He has been preparing for months; circling his vessel, claiming it. Reviewing the battle plans. He has stood shoulder to shoulder with the angels of his garrison, ready; he has received revelation from the archangel Michael himself. *Save Dean Winchester. Save Dean Winchester.* The three words consume him. They are the only language he knows.

He's ready for the pits of Hell. For fire, and the stench of perdition; for the demons with their foul faces and their wiles. He's ready to slice through legions of them. His mission is righteous; *Save Dean Winchester.* He will not be halted. He will triumph, or he will die trying.

Save Dean Winchester. In this small human form, it's a taste in his mouth; it's a scent on the air. It's the rhythm that beats the dance of atoms, the key that twists wavelengths of light. It's the burn of ozone after a lightning strike. It's the clap of thunder that might be Castiel's father's voice.

Save Dean Winchester. That's his destiny, and he's going to fulfill it.

Only — he wasn't quite expecting *this.*

There are no flames. No screaming Hell-creatures. There's an air conditioning unit humming creakily under the window, a painting of a palm tree by an ocean on the wall; there's an empty bed, a duffel bag of weapons split open on it. And on the other bed — stretched out on top of the covers, face scrunched into the pillow — is a young man. He's wearing a t-shirt and boxers, legs bare; his hair sticks up with sleep. He snores slightly, and shifts. His fingers stay curled around the grip of a handgun, hidden under the pillow.

Save Dean Winchester. That's Dean Winchester. Castiel would know him anywhere. But what he's supposed to be saving him from — where the rest of the garrison is, how he ended up here, what in the world is happening —

Castiel has no idea.

After a while, Castiel decides to sit down on the unoccupied bed and watch Dean Winchester sleep.

It seems like the best of his options. There is no evident threat; if he needs to save this Dean Winchester from something, that something isn't here yet. Besides, he seems — tired. Castiel's surprised to realize he understands that; something in the shadows on Dean Winchester's face, the lines around his young eyes, makes him look weary to the bone. He twitches occasionally, breath hitching and shoulders tensing in his sleep, but Castiel discovers that a thread of grace can quiet him, even from across the room.

The TV is on, volume turned low, and Dean doesn't seem to react to its flickering light. A man keeps talking excitedly about something called OxiClean. Castiel finds him annoying, but he discovers that he doesn't want to risk disturbing Dean by making the TV turn off.

He peers outside the curtains once. If this is a trick, it's a well constructed one; the parking lot is lit by halogen streetlights, their glow orange on the rain-shiny pavement. It's about half full of cars, including a big black one that gleams outside the door. It's mostly quiet, but there's the occasional screech of tires on the highway, stoplights turning from green to yellow to red. *Hotel Tropical,* says the neon sign reflected in a puddle. A couple comes out of their room to smoke in the plastic chairs outside their door, then goes inside again. A pair of people across the parking lot have an angry, murmured conversation, and one gives the other money.

None of them look like demons. None of them display the slightest interest in Dean's room, or Dean's car, or the sliver of darkness that shifts in Dean's curtains.

The newspaper on the table says the year is 2003. That seems incorrect to Castiel, though he's unaccustomed to human reckonings of time; it should be 2008 by now. If he correctly recalls the revolutions around the sun since the business in Nazareth began —

He's too lost in his thoughts to notice that the man across the room is moving again, muttering in his sleep, until it's too late.

There's a soft *thump.* Castiel turns to see that Dean's pillow has fallen off the bed; his gun gleams in the TV light, clutched close to his chest. He's mumbling louder now, and he thrashes as Castiel hurries back toward him — as Castiel extends his hand.

Castiel doesn't know what possesses him to do it. He's been able to soothe Dean's nightmares from across the room just fine. Maybe it's a latent instinct of his vessel, the human craving for comfort by touch; he wants to lay his hand on Dean's forehead. He wants to smooth away his fears.

The moment their skin touches, Dean's awake, and there's the barrel of the gun pressing into Castiel's vessel's sternum.

Wide green eyes stare into Castiel's, shocked round; Dean's chest is heaving. That's panic chasing itself across his face, and Castiel's sorry, instantly; he didn't want to be the cause of that. He raises his hands, eases back. "I apologize. I didn't intend —"

"Who the fuck *are* you," says Dean, and he doesn't wait for an answer; he jerks the trigger, and shoots Castiel through the heart.

Castiel glances down at his chest.

There's a round bullet hole, smoking slightly, through Jimmy Novak's blue tie. Another one, rougher and larger, through the fabric of the trenchcoat at his back. He can feel the tissue inside of him knitting back together, all the extraneous parts — Jimmy Novak's bones and blood vessels and heart. He looks back up at Dean.

Dean shoots him again.

And that won't do; Castiel steps forward to take the gun from Dean's hand. His grip is surprisingly strong, for a human, though it's no match for Castiel's. "Shh," he tells Dean; "I don't know the nature of the danger here, but I have to assume it is present. We shouldn't make more noise than we have to." He presses Dean's arm back to his chest and pats it lightly, hoping that's reassuring. "Do you have any reason to believe something may be threatening your safety?"

"Well, there's this bulletproof guy in my room," Dean snaps, and slams a knife blade into Castiel's chest.

That was clever; Castiel didn't see where he was keeping that. Dean rears back, scrambling across the bed, as Castiel looks down. The hilt juts out from a spot between his vessel's ribs. He imagines this would be painful for a human. He pulls it free, slowly, and lets it drop to the floor.

Dean's staring at him again. His eyes are enormous, mouth slack with disbelief.

Castiel finds that he could look into those eyes for some time.

Dean bolts for the door.

He barely has a hand on it, yanking it open, before Castiel's grace catches up; he slams the door shut. Dean wrenches at the knob uselessly. Once, again. "Let me *out,"* he snaps, "Goddamnit, let me out __"

Then, abruptly, his shoulders go still; after a moment, they sag. When he turns to face Castiel, his eyes are glittering with fury and defeat. "You're not gonna. Are you."

Castiel doesn't like the idea of being Dean's captor. "It might be dangerous," he counters, carefully. "You should stay in here, where it's safe."

Dean snorts. "Heard that one before."

Castiel doesn't like that either. He doesn't like the shift in Dean's posture, from anger to acceptance; he doesn't like the message practically screaming out of Dean's soul: *Can't kill him, so might as well find out what he wants.*

There's another painting of a beach on the wall at Dean's back; it's been knocked askew in his flight. There's the outline of a flamingo on the doormat under his feet. The wallpaper pressing against his shoulderblades is printed in palm trees. They are approximately one thousand miles from the nearest ocean.

"Castiel," says Castiel.

Dean's chin jerks. "What?"

"You asked who I was. My name is Castiel."

"That supposed to mean something to me?"

Of course Castiel shouldn't expect it to. Dean's had an upsetting, confusing evening. "I'm an angel of the Lord," he explains. "And I'm here to save you."

If there's one reaction Castiel has never experienced to his own annunciation, it's laughter.

It takes Dean a moment. For a long beat of silence, he simply stares. Castiel has the distinct sense Dean's taking in his human appearance for the first time; the dark, rumpled hair, the business dress, the blue eyes. The shape of Jimmy Novak's body, athletic enough for a man in his thirties. Castiel has the odd thought that he's older than Dean, a little, by human reckoning; of course, in his true form he's older than Dean by hundreds of millions of years.

Dean's gaze seems almost — approving, somewhere between the fury and the fear. Admiring, maybe, even. Which is why it takes Castiel by surprise when, a moment later, Dean bursts out laughing.

Not just laughing, no; he's wheezing, doubled over, sliding down to the floor. He pulls his knees to his chest and he laughs and he laughs and he *laughs,* loudly again, which Castiel is sure he should object to on grounds of laying low, but — he doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know how to respond to mockery. He's never faced it before; not from a mere human.

"I'm sorry," Dean gasps, "I'm sorry, is this — some kind of joke? You a stripper or something? *Hot holy tax accountant?"*

Castiel stiffens. He doesn't quite understand the words, but they seem profane. "This is a vessel," he counters. "My true form is approximately the size of your Chrysler Building."

That only makes Dean laugh harder. "So you *are* a stripper."

"I am —"

"Angel of the lord, yeah, yeah." Dean wipes tears from his eyes. "Well, hate to break it to you, buddy, but angels aren't *real.* So, I don't know what kind of hopped-up freak you are or what exactly you think you're *saving* me from, but I'm thinking you maybe get on with it, 'cause I gotta be in Des Moines by noon, and this whole thing has really — really just fucked with my beauty sleep."

Castiel draws himself up. "I apologize for waking you. I *already tried* to apologize for waking you. But my mission is to save you. I am commanded by God." He can hear his voice growing, changing, the galaxy echoing through it; he can feel his shoulders swelling, light flaring from his fingertips. "You should consider your mockery wisely, Dean Winchester. I am Heaven's soldier, and you have Heaven's favor

— for now."

He doesn't realize until it's almost too late that Dean is hunched now, not in laughter, but pain.

He has his hands over his ears. He's squinting into Castiel's light, shying away — trying to make himself small. Castiel's voice echoes, reverberates down every frequency; the man on the TV finally shuts up, white light fuzzing him into nothing.

An instant later, the TV explodes.

Dean yells. And the window behind him is shattering too; glass flies. A streetlight outside lets out a *bang* and a shower of sparks. Castiel can feel his wings expand to fill the room, carving shadows by instinct — to shield Dean. To keep him safe.

There are people waking up in the neighboring motel rooms, yelling in alarm. Castiel lets his light fade, but the damage is done. The night air blows through their window, hot and humid, and the AC sputters and dies. Slowly, slowly, Dean lowers his hands from his face.

They need to get out of here. They've attracted too much attention.

Castiel says, "I will take you to Des Moines."

He selects an unremarkable side street. A few run-down houses, a corner store; no one who will pay much attention to the sudden appearance of a big black car at the other end of the block. They're facing east; the sun is just starting to streak the horizon. Someone in pajamas is out walking her dog.

Castiel watches Dean jerk his hands from the steering wheel with a start. "You — what? Where the hell are we?"

"Des Moines," Castiel repeats. "I told you. You are — approximately six hours and forty-three minutes ahead of schedule."

Dean lowers his hands slowly. He glances around, looking spooked. "I thought — you were just gonna lock me in that room or something."

"I'm an angel, Dean. I don't need to imprison you in order to watch over you."

Dean swallows. Castiel's use of his name seems to affect him. He

glances around. “So, if I jumped out of this car right now and started running —”

“I wouldn’t stop you. I would go with you.” Castiel adds, scrupulously, “I might need to prevent you from doing anything stupid.”

Dean stares out the windshield. He seems to be thinking about something; it takes him a long time. His face is pale, and he looks shaken. “You’re really a — that. An angel.”

“I have only told you the truth.”

“And you’re — my. Uh, angel. Like a guardian angel?”

Castiel considers. “That concept does seem applicable here, yes.”

Dean looks down at his hands.

They’re starting to tremble. Castiel follows his gaze, watches as Dean turns his hands over to stare at the palms. The shaking intensifies, and Dean bites down on his lip. Castiel thinks for a moment he’s going to draw blood. But he doesn’t, just folds his hands closed again, pressing one thumb down hard against his own pulse point, and lifts his chin.

Some mask drops back into place. Dean snorts, lightly, and shoots Castiel a wry look. “All right, well. If I’m handcuffed to you anyway — what d’you say we get breakfast?”

Dean says he knows a diner on the other side of the city that has the best hash browns you’ve ever tasted. Castiel has never tasted a hash brown, but he agrees; a moment later, they’re in the parking lot, vehicle and all.

“Whoa,” says Dean. “You gotta — you gotta stop doing that, man.”

“It’s an efficient mode of transport.”

“It’s a mindfuck, is what it is.” Dean reaches for the door handle, then stops.

Castiel glances at him. “What’s the matter?”

“I’m, uh.” Dean clears his throat. His face is pink. “I’m not wearing pants.”

“Oh.” Castiel glances down at Dean’s lap; he’s still clad in a t-shirt and boxers, bare feet resting on the floor mat. “I brought your things. They should be in the trunk. Would you like me to — get them for you?”

Dean’s face is definitely red now. “That’d be great. Thanks, Cas.”

Cas. Castiel doesn’t object, just blinks himself to the back of the car and opens the trunk. There are two duffel bags in there, one filled with weapons, but the other seems to contain clothes; he takes that and Dean’s boots and blinks himself back into the passenger seat.

Dean’s staring at him again. “You couldn’t *walk?”* he asks, flatly, but he shakes his head and reaches into the bag, rifling through fabric. He glances over at Castiel again before levering himself up in the seat to wriggle into his jeans, then pulls on a pair of socks and shoves his feet into the boots. He’s halfway out of the car before he stops and glances back. “Well? You coming?”

Castiel hesitates. “I — don’t actually eat much. Or, at all. I could — if it would make you more comfortable for me to watch over you from here —”

“Jesus fuck.” Dean tips his face to the sky; for a brief moment, all his frayed nerves are back on display. “Come — eat breakfast, all right? Just — be normal, for half a second. If you don’t want yours, I’ll eat it for you. Okay?”

“Okay.” Castiel mimics the unfamiliar syllables; they feel strange on his tongue. He makes sure he follows Dean’s directive, opening his door to climb out of the car, following Dean across the parking lot; he doesn’t quite catch up until they make it to the door. Dean shoots a look back at him, and Castiel glimpses something complicated in his eyes; then he’s shouldering inside.

A waitress seats them at a booth near the back corner, and Castiel catches Dean shifting in his seat, eyeing the exit routes. “It’s okay,” he tells Dean, in an undertone. “I already checked the patrons. No one in here is a demon.”

Dean startles visibly. “Demons — Jesus. What kind of shit are you getting into?”

“I told you, I’m an angel of the Lord, and —”

“You were sent to save me, yeah, yeah.” Dean hesitates for a moment, as if he’s making a decision, then leans in. “Why don’t we start at the

beginning for a sec? Put our heads together. You first — you were sent to save me from *what?"*

That's the thing, though. Castiel hesitates. He's — not sure.

"You don't know," Dean says. "You actually — you have no idea."

"Something went — wrong," Castiel tells him stiffly. "Or — unexpected. I don't know. I expected to be sent to you five years from now. In the year 2008."

Whatever Dean was expecting, it doesn't seem to have been that. He blinks at Castiel for a moment; his lips part in a small round *o,* shining softly under the fluorescent lights. Then he licks them and falls back in his seat. "2008," he repeats. "You mean, that's —"

He's interrupted by the waitress coming over to take their orders. Dean's countenance slips instantly into a charming smile; he orders for both of them, something about coffees and omelettes and cowboy breakfasts, which the waitress scribbles down with apparent understanding. As soon as she's gone, Dean leans forward again, demand in his voice. "You're saying you can *time travel?"*

Castiel's shoulderblades feel irritable. He's not accustomed to being questioned by a human. "On occasion. When Heaven desires it."

"So this is — Heaven must have sent you here."

His logic is hard to fault. Castiel knows some individual angels strong enough to time travel without assistance; it's difficult to imagine why any of them would interfere with his mission, though. And then there's his mission directive, strong and clear as ever: *Save Dean Winchester.* "I believe they did, yes."

"And you're supposed to — save me? Were you supposed to save me in 2008, too?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what you're supposed to save me from *then?"*

Castiel hesitates.

He feels, for some reason, like he doesn't want to tell Dean. He doesn't want Dean to *know.*

Why? To spare him pain? That's not in Castiel's directive. He was sent

to *save* Dean Winchester, not to coddle him.

Still, he hesitates.

“Come on, man, spit it out,” Dean snaps.

“Hell,” Castiel says. “In 2008, I was sent to save you from Hell.”

Dean sways in his seat.

Castiel sees him swallow. Once, twice; he picks up a fork and sets it down.

“Okay,” he says. “So this is, like — a *It’s a Wonderful Life* type thing.”

“A — what?”

Dean’s eyes are fixed on the table in front of him, his voice forcefully light. “You know, angel sent to show a guy the error of his ways? Though I mean, like, that guy wasn’t gonna go to hell. Maybe more of a *Christmas Carol* type thing. Or, a — *Emperor’s New Groove.* Angel on my shoulder.”

Castiel blinks. He replays everything Dean just said again in his head, and draws a blank. “What?”

“I mean, it’s pretty obvious, right? You’re supposed to save me from Hell. So — I’m going to Hell. ‘Cause, I’m a, you know, shitty fucking person, which — no arguments here — but. You must have to, like — stop me from doing even worse shit.”

“Oh.” Castiel shakes his head. “No, that isn’t the directive.”

“‘That isn’t the directive,’” Dean mutters. “What, like suddenly you know what you’re supposed to do?”

He’s still avoiding Castiel’s eyes. Castiel leans in; on an impulse, he touches Dean’s chin with his fingers, forcing him to look up.

Dean’s eyes meet his reluctantly. There’s a fragility in them that belies his tone; once they catch on Castiel’s, they snag there, like he can’t quite look away.

“I’m a soldier of God,” Castiel murmurs. “A warrior. I am trained for battle, not — dispensing advice.”

Dean swallows. Castiel can feel his Adam's apple brush against the backs of his fingers; he feels a strange urge to touch Dean's throat. Turn his hand and cup it, just gently, not enough to harm — just enough to pin Dean where he sits. Just enough to fix that attention, that thrum of paralyzed focus, on Castiel and Castiel alone.

The waitress is coming back with their coffees. Castiel drops his hand abruptly and looks down; Dean's face is pink, and he thinks his might be too. There's a prickling in his grace, a hot wanting in his hands, that he doesn't know what to do with.

"So I assume," he says to the formica tabletop as the waitress retreats, "it must be demons."

Dean shakes his head. If he's still caught up in whatever moment they just had, he doesn't show it; he's frowning over at Castiel. "You keep saying that, man. I don't — I've barely ever run *into* demons. It's not like they're — swarming the earth, or whatever. I mean — I can ask my dad when I see him later, but —"

"Your father?"

Castiel can't explain the prickle of unease that spreads down his wings; he has heard, vaguely, of Dean Winchester's father. Also in Hell. Cut from the same cloth — or maybe not *quite* the same.

Dean seems wrong-footed by the intensity of his response. "Yeah, uh — he's who I'm meeting later. At noon. He's — a hunter, he'll know if anyone's been seeing demons around."

Castiel considers for a moment. Then he nods, judicious. "Good. We'll ask him."

"Oh, no no no." Dean shifts out of the way to make room as the waitress deposits their plates in front of them; then he shifts back and points at Castiel with his fork. "No. You are *not* meeting my dad."

"Why not?"

"Because —" Dean takes a big bite of food, chews for a moment, then sighs, revealing half-masticated eggs. "Because he'll kill you, that's why. Or *try* to, and then I'll have to explain the whole angel thing, and then — he'll probably think I'm crazy and hogtie me in the trunk."

He smiles, as if that last part's a joke, but it's a pained sort of smile. Castiel says, "I can protect you."

“Yeah, I *also* don’t need you — smiting my dad or whatever.” If anything, Dean’s smile grows more forced. “Look — you can wait in the car. Or, not the car, he’s gonna wanna see the car, but — I won’t run off or something, I promise. Just let me handle this.”

Castiel does not particularly want to let Dean handle this.

“Fine,” he says, and takes a big bite of Dean’s hash browns, even though they only taste like molecules.

Dean sets Castiel up at a Chinese restaurant across the street from the bar where he’s meeting his father. He parks his car around the back of another block, out of sight; “Sometimes he gets paranoid about that shit.” Castiel observes that Dean had no qualms parking his car in front of his own motel room, back where Castiel found him, and Dean just shrugs.

Castiel watches Dean disappear into the bar. He waits. He sips his tea, which Dean told him to just keep ordering if he really doesn’t want to eat anything. Thirty-seven minutes later, a big black truck pulls up and parks with its tires on the curb. The man that gets out has something of Dean in him — not in his features, really, or even his soul, but the way he holds himself, the tension in his muscles, the way his eyes dart up and down the block before he opens the door to the bar and goes inside.

Castiel drinks more tea. Time passes; fifteen minutes. Twenty. The bar door swings open again, and it’s John Winchester, alone. He climbs into his truck and drives away.

Castiel waits.

But Dean doesn’t come out. It’s one thirty now; one forty-five. Castiel is growing sick of tea.

At two o’clock, he pays his bill — Dean taught him how to count out the money from Jimmy Novak’s wallet — and crosses the street.

When he enters the bar, he doesn’t see Dean. He looks around twice, then goes to the bathrooms. Dean isn’t relieving himself. Castiel returns to the front.

“Hello,” he tells the woman wiping down the bar. “I’m looking for a man.” How to describe Dean? “He’s — very beautiful. With green

eyes."

He sees her expression flicker, the moment of anger, then the weariness in her eyes. She sets down her rag. "Hon. Usually when a kid like that leaves through the back, it ain't because he wants to be found."

Kid? "Dean is not a child," Castiel clarifies. "He's a twenty-four-year-old man."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night," the bartender mutters, which makes no sense at all; Castiel doesn't sleep. "Well, anyway. He's not here, so. Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

Castiel glances around. Her assessment does seem correct. "Thank you," he tells her. Dean keeps scolding him to walk places, but he's not sure what to make of the bartender's comment about her aggressive door; it seems simplest to blink to Dean's parking spot instead.

He catches a glimpse of the bartender's startled expression as he vanishes. Then he's on the sidewalk, the same spot he stepped out of Dean's car earlier. Castiel let Dean drive them here; it seems to mean a lot to him, driving. There's some novelty in the experience of sitting in a wheeled conveyance, moving at a human's pace.

The street is empty. Dean's car isn't there.

Castiel closes his eyes. He stretches out his awareness, on the wings of his grace. Over the city, the surrounding towns; the countryside with its fields of corn. Over the river of cars stretching west on a ribbon of asphalt, and — there.

Castiel blinks into the passenger seat. "Hello, Dean."

Dean yells. The steering wheel jerks in his hands, and the car nearly veers into the other lane; Dean rights it at the last moment. He has one hand on his chest, eyes wide. *"Jesus,* dude. You scared the shit out of me."

"You attempted to leave without me."

"Guess that's a lesson learned." Dean shakes his head as if to clear it, darting a glance at Castiel. "How'd you find me?"

Castiel looks around at the dashboard, the upholstery. "You have a

fairly distinctive car."

"A fairly —" Dean repeats. He sounds like he's having some sort of medical problem. "A *fairly* distinctive car?"

"Yes."

"A fairly — dude, this is a '67 Impala. 327 four barrel, 275 horses. This is —"

And he's off, rattling equivalencies that Castiel can't begin to understand. Castiel has counseled with Solomon, laid judgment on the people of Canaan, watched Noah fill his ark; but however Dean is reckoning the power of horses in ratio to African antelopes, it's beyond him.

He listens, though. He finds he likes listening to Dean talk.

It's some time, then, before they circle back to the situation at hand. Dean has seemingly talked himself out; Castiel has gleaned that the car is to be referred to as Baby or The Impala, despite its utter lack of resemblance to a young gazelle. He says into the silence, "You said you wouldn't run off."

Dean's shoulders rise, as if he's about to fire some incomprehensible insult at Castiel; then they slump. "Yeah. Sorry."

"Were you lying?"

The question seems to make Dean sad. He glances around swiftly as he drives, away from Castiel; then he says, "No. I just — things changed."

"Your father?"

"He's got a hunt he wants my help on, back in Colorado. I figured — I can't let him see you, and you've probably got better shit to be doing, so —"

"My mission is to save you. There is no better shit."

Dean runs his hand through his hair. He has that look in his eyes again, darting down; they might be shining more than usual. He says, softly, "Right."

Castiel studies him. He means to anyway; next time he's asking a bartender for Dean's whereabouts, he should be able to provide a more precise description.

Dean has full lips. There's a tremble at the corner of his mouth right now, as there often is, a potentiation; Castiel's seen it slide into a grin, a joke, a snarl of defiance. It doesn't look like any of those things right now. It looks sad.

He's beautiful. With green eyes, Castiel said, but he forgot the eyelashes framing them. He forgot the faint freckles that dust over Dean's cheeks, his nose; the ancients could draw constellations in them. He didn't forget — he couldn't — the way Dean's eyes look when they land on Castiel's, but he doesn't know the words to describe them. Trusting and bitter and hopeful and terrified all at the same time.

The lines of Dean's body would not disappoint a sculptor, though he hides them under a heavy leather coat. Neither would the bones of his face. A muscle flexes in his jaw, and his knuckles are tight on the steering wheel. Castiel's scrutiny makes him uncomfortable. And yet he blossoms into it, yearns for it — and hates himself for the yearning.

He doesn't believe he deserves to be saved.

Castiel wants to touch him. He wants to prove it to him, as if that could be done with a touch; as if his hands that could move Dean across continents, could deliver him sleep or healing or read the contents of his soul, could just as easily offer him love.

His hands. Jimmy Novak's hands. But Castiel wants to touch Dean with them; like Ptolemy, like Michelangelo.

"Dude. You're staring," says Dean.

Castiel says, "Yes."

"Well — quit it."

"If that's what you prefer."

He doesn't quit it, though. And Dean doesn't object; he just swallows and drums two fingers on the steering wheel and says, "I asked my dad about demons, by the way. He hasn't heard anything about recent activity."

"I see."

They drive for a while in silence. Castiel keeps thinking that maybe if he's searching for someone who wants Dean Winchester damned, he could do worse than to start with Dean Winchester himself.

It's around ten in the evening when they make it to Sterling, Colorado. They passed North Platte hours ago; that's where Castiel found Dean, and he can't help but point out that John Winchester could have simply met Dean there if he was going in this direction anyway. He's somewhat proud of himself for working that out — the constraints and linearity of human travel remain perplexing to him, especially Dean's insistence on adhering to them — but Dean just says, "Don't worry about it."

They've already agreed that Castiel will make himself scarce at the motel. John didn't check on the Impala in Des Moines, but he'll certainly want to do it here — it used to be, Castiel has learned, John's car. Castiel acquiesces, on the condition that he doesn't have to drink tea.

The simplest solution — as far as Castiel is concerned — is to sit in the Impala's front seat, invisible. He thinks Dean might not like that, so he doesn't tell him.

Instead he watches John and Dean come and go for two days. He sees the way they work together, fluid and familiar; the way Dean understands his job before John asks it of him, his ready *yes, sir*. They're a commanding officer and his trusted soldier, and Castiel should approve of that. He does approve of that. He is, after all, a soldier himself, if one far from any command.

There's no reason, Castiel tells himself, that he should dislike John Winchester more each time he passes the hood of the Impala. It's only that Dean said his father would want to look at it. It's only that Dean can talk about this car for twenty minutes without taking a breath; it's only the way that Dean's shoulders make him look small every time he climbs into his father's truck cab instead of sliding behind his own steering wheel.

Castiel follows them most of the time, invisible. They go the library, and interview witnesses; Dean is better at that than John. Castiel gleans that they are hunting what they call a black dog. He briefly worries that it might be a hellhound, but there are no signs of demonic activity in the area when he checks.

On the second evening, Dean comes to sit in the Impala. He looks miserable, tension around his eyes, and he sits there blankly for a full minute before he pulls a cell phone out of his pocket and looks down

at it. There's only a short list of names; he scrolls, then stops over one that just says *Sam.*

He looks at it for a minute. Then he presses a button, and the phone screen goes dark. He turns it over, presses it into his thigh.

Castiel makes himself visible. "Who is Sam?"

Dean jumps. His phone clatters down into the footwell; he hunches to retrieve it. "Cas! Jesus. You scared the fuck out of me." But his face looks happy, suddenly, for the first time in days. As he sits up again, he pivots toward Castiel, reaches out to clasp a hand to his shoulder; Castiel looks down at it. "You okay? I was worried. I haven't seen you in — two days."

Dean was worried about him? That makes no sense. "You had no cause for concern. I am an angel. I'm very difficult to kill."

"Yeah, I got that." There's a small twist of humor on Dean's lips. "What with the stabbing and shooting and all. I meant like — I dunno, just wondering if you've been doing good, is all."

He says the last part in a rush. Castiel tilts his head, considering him.

He has not been doing good, all things considered. He has been frustrated and bored and ever angrier with John Winchester; he has been waiting patiently for a demonic attack that doesn't seem to be coming. He has missed Dean, which seems like a treacherous small thing to admit.

"I have been well," he says instead. It tastes strange on his tongue; is this his first lie?

Dean's still looking at him like he can't quite believe Castiel is real. Like he needs to memorize him, sitting here in the Impala, before he vanishes again. After a moment, he swallows, then blurts, "I didn't even know you guys *could* die."

"As far as I know, the only thing that can kill an angel is another angel." Recklessly, Castiel manifests his blade; slips it from his sleeve. "With one of these. Perhaps humans can wield them; I don't know." He passes it to Dean.

Dean nearly drops it. The metal is heavy, Castiel understands; but he thinks it's more to do with the weight of the gesture.

His grip recovered, Dean holds the blade carefully in both hands; he tests the balance of it, the sharpness of the edge. If he's aware he could turn and stab Castiel right now, he doesn't acknowledge it; his Adam's apple bobs. He passes the blade back.

Castiel takes it, restores it to its place. "In any case. You asked me to lay low."

"Yeah, but —" Dean runs a hand through his hair, huffing out a breath; he seems relieved at the change in topic. "Man, I had no way of getting in touch with you, nothing. Not like you carry one of these, right?" He lifts his cell phone.

"Oh." Castiel smiles. "If you wish to contact me, Dean, you only need to pray."

"Pray?" Dean echoes. His eyebrows scrunch up in that way that means he's uncomfortable with a situation but still working out how to turn it into a joke. "What, you mean like — 'Castiel who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name'?"

It *does* feel hallowed, on Dean's lips. Castiel feels a shiver of pleasure pass over him, and again, that urge to touch — to press his thumb to Dean's mouth and ask him to say it again.

"My name will suffice," he murmurs. "Tell me what you need, and I will be there."

Dean's gaze hangs for a moment on his; then he flushes and looks down. "Don't need anything, I just — just wanted to know you're all right out there. You know — didn't run out of cash of something."

"Money is irrelevant to me."

"Yeah, yeah, okay." Dean glances down at his phone, turning it over in his hands. "He's my brother," he adds. "Sam."

Of course. Castiel remembers that, too; the younger brother headed down a dangerous road. He hasn't received any further specific information, so it must not be mission-critical. Zachariah always sounded a little bit gleeful when he spoke about it, though. Castiel never understood why.

"He left," Dean's saying. "He's at Stanford, and — I just miss him sometimes, 'sall."

“I’m sorry.”

That makes Dean glance at him, sidelong. After a moment, he says, “Yeah. Yeah, thanks.” He clears his throat. “Anyway. We’re going after this thing tonight. Black dog. I should — I should probably gear up.”

Castiel isn’t overly familiar with black dogs; all he knows is they’re not hellhounds. Are they dangerous? Maybe he’s making a mistake, assuming the threat to Dean will come from a predictable quarter. “I could go with you.”

Dean looks briefly startled by that; then his face folds into a complicated expression. “My dad can’t see you; I told you, Cas.”

He doesn’t need to see me. But Castiel doesn’t quite want to reveal all of his abilities. “My directive —”

“Look.” Dean’s voice is firm. “You’re supposed to — keep me safe or whatever, right? Well — I’ll be with my dad the whole time. He’s the best hunter in the business. I’ll be safe with him. Okay?”

“I’m supposed to *save* you.” It’s not quite the same as keeping Dean safe; though Castiel finds he would like to do both.

There’s something nagging on the edge of his consciousness, though. Something distracting.

This modern human world is full of distractions. A pop song on every radio frequency; people’s cell phone conversations flying through the air. But there’s — there’s another wavelength tugging at him, something familiar.

Something angelic.

Castiel hasn’t heard a single static note of revelation since he got here. Heaven has been quiet, and that’s not unusual; that’s how it’s been for centuries. Right now, the angels should be waiting. Preparing, quietly, for their father to give the word.

Now there’s another angel on earth. Somewhere nearby. Maybe two; their frequencies feel like a trick of the light, sometimes different, sometimes all but identical.

“Very well.” Castiel can always go find Dean later; he can always trail them unseen. For now — “Remember. If you need me — pray.”

The angelic frequencies are coming from a factory outside of town. By the time Castiel gets there, it's too late.

The night watchman — or what's left of him — is slumped against a wall.

Castiel has seen would-be vessels before with their eyes burned out. He's seen discarded vessels rocking and clutching themselves, their minds seared away. He's never quite seen something like this.

The man's face is shattered. Burned out from within, his eyes gone, but his skull itself is in pieces — hanging together by a tortured mess of blood and muscle. Its geometry is a grotesque impression of what once might have been a face; now it's cubist art. The man's lips are moving, somehow, despite being split across two planes, but barely a sound comes out. When Castiel leans close, he hears: *"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes."*

He shouldn't be alive. Everything in him is broken. Still — Castiel reaches out, warily, to try and heal him.

The moment his grace makes contact, he's thrown back.

He skids across the pavement and feels impact — metal crumples around him. The side of a car; he has to peel metal back to lever himself free. Inside Jimmy Novak's body, blood vessels are knitting themselves back together; splintered bones are snapping into place. The man is still sitting there murmuring just like before. But the force that answered Castiel —

This vessel isn't possessed. Not anymore. But he's still sloppy with grace.

Only an angel can kill another angel, Castiel told Dean.

The vessel isn't trying to kill him, though he came closer than Castiel likes. He's just spilling grace everywhere, a mess of it, none of it doing what it should be doing — healing his wounds. Whatever angelic consciousness has touched his form, it's departed again, leaving its leftover power directionless — a seething trap.

What could spill so much power without missing it? Who?

But Castiel already knows. He already knows the resonance of those

tones; he already knows the power of the force that knocked him back.

An archangel.

That must be what's holding the body together — what's continuing to animate it despite his condition. Castiel feels sick. It's a horrible thing to do to a vessel — to anyone. This man is beyond healing. He is beyond anything Castiel can do to save him, or even to help give him peace. He is doomed to simply suffer; to die slowly, horribly, as the force keeping him alive finally ebbs away.

Castiel glances around. An archangel came to this town. Were they looking for Castiel — trying to return him to his own timeline? Trying to clarify his strange mission? They could have simply spoken to him, then.

Were they looking for Dean?

Castiel feels uneasy. He has never questioned an archangel before. But he looks down at the body before him, and what he feels is disgust. Not for the man in his suffering, no; for anyone who would do this, and then leave him to die alone.

Regardless — the night is quiet now. If an archangel was here, they're long gone. Castiel would sense them if they came back. And Dean — Dean is off hunting with his father. But Dean knows to pray to him if he needs help.

Castiel won't leave the vessel to die alone.

He eases himself down to sit on the pavement beside it. He can hear the broken stream of words again — *"Yes. Yes. Yes."* Like the man is trapped in the instant of possession — the instant of consent.

Is this how Jimmy Novak felt, when he gave himself to Castiel? Is this how he feels even now, buried so deep Castiel can't even hear him — or is he gone?

Which possibility is the worse one?

Castiel can't touch the vessel with his grace. But maybe — if he's very careful —

He reaches out with his hand, and his hand alone.

Blood seeps between his fingers as he laces them through the vessel's. But there's no recoil; no force throwing him back. Just two men sitting on the pavement, hand in hand.

It takes hours. The murmuring stops quickly — Castiel thinks his touch has something to do with that — but the death takes longer. It's slow and gurgling and horrible, and every moment of it Castiel wishes that he could be somewhere else, anywhere, but he doesn't let go.

Finally — at long last — it's done.

Without the grace holding it together, the body is barely recognizable as a body. It's more just an awful smear.

The humans will identify it anyway. They can do that now, Castiel knows; they've developed technologies for reading their own DNA. The watchman will be missed, and the stain on the pavement will be the obvious answer. They'll take a sample. It'll be confirmed.

His loved ones will suffer; they'll never understand what could do that. What happened to him, and why.

A strange death. It might make news. Dean and his father might feel called to investigate it.

Castiel reaches out tentatively with his grace. And it's not repelled this time — this time, when he tries to knit the man on the pavement back together, he succeeds.

He was moderately handsome. A man in his forties; he reminds Castiel vaguely of Dean. He lies there with a peaceful look on his face, clothes free of blood. The coroner will find that his heart stopped. A tragedy.

Castiel feels blindingly angry.

His hands are shaking, clenched into fists. *Come down here, you son of a bitch,* he wants to scream to the heavens. *Come down here and face me. Face what you did.*

He doesn't.

But he needs to dispel this furious energy somehow, so — he walks.

It's eight miles back to Dean's motel. Castiel walks all of them, quick bitter steps on the side of the road. The morning grows gradually light, and cars start passing him by, on their way to work; a few of

them honk their horns. Castiel ignores them and keeps walking.

The sun is high and hot by the time he makes it back to the motel, steaming off the dun concrete of the parking lot. Castiel barely remembers in time that he's supposed to be invisible. A moment later, he realizes that John's truck isn't here — only Dean's car.

He frowns. Are they still hunting? He stretches his awareness out, past the motel room door, and —

Dean.

Castiel slams the door open. It swings back behind him, doorknob dangling useless from the splintered wood, but he doesn't care.

This is the first time he's set foot in this motel room. It doesn't look dissimilar to the last one; dark wallpaper, zealous decor. There's a painting of dogs playing poker on the wall, a wooden screen painted with aces of hearts and spades separating the two beds from the small kitchenette. It couldn't be clearer that John's bed is abandoned — there are no bags beside it. The covers are smoothed into place with military precision.

The curtains are drawn, and no lights are on in the room, but one is spilling out from under the bathroom door.

Castiel pushes this door open slowly. After all, he doesn't want to hit Dean.

And there Dean is — sprawled out on the tiles. He's propped between the toilet and the bathtub, half-sitting, and his shirt's off. There's a bottle of whiskey by his left hand and a needle in his right and a long, lurid gash, studded with stitches, across his side.

"Dean," Castiel says. He thinks he's shaking.

Dean opens his eyes.

The green of them is hazed with pain and maybe whiskey. "Cas," he slurs, "I was jus' thinkin' about you." He smiles. "Cas. Castiel. Hey, Cas."

"You're hurt." The bathroom light flickers. Castiel's hands are in fists.

"'Salright." Dean blinks. "Jus' a — just a flesh wound." He giggles, uncharacteristic. There's blood on the ceramic. A balled up, bloody

shirt on the floor.

“Where is your father?”

“Had to — had to go.” Dean shakes his head, letting it loll left. “Next job. New lead. Wouldn’t tell me what.”

And he’s moving, attempting to lever himself against the rim of the bathtub. To move — toward Castiel. His hand slips, and he lands with a thump on the tile.

“Dean,” says Castiel again, and takes two steps, and catches him.

With one of his hands, he cups Dean’s jaw, lifting his chin. The other, at Dean’s shoulder, presses him back against the wall. Dean lets out a small *oof,* like it causes him pain.

After the night he’s had, Castiel’s grace feels threadbare — a thin and flickering thing. It doesn’t matter. He gathers it within him, coiling and coaxing, stoking it to whatever blaze he can muster — and then he presses it into Dean’s skin.

He feels Dean go still and startled. His lips part, and his breath stutters, eyes finally locking on Castiel’s.

He has more than just the slash on his side. Two cracked ribs; innumerable bruises. Mild head trauma. A sprained wrist. Castiel stuffs his power into one injury, then the next, reckless — somehow, he can keep going. And beyond — into the old scar that tugs at Dean’s thigh muscle. Into decades-old burns in his lungs. Into all of him, cleansing — as if he could burn away everything that’s ever hurt Dean. His father and his brother and all the ghosts and black dogs in the world.

Dean’s body is suffused with blue light; it arches, up toward Castiel’s. His mouth opens, but no sound comes out; only light spilling from his throat. His eyes reflect the blue blaze of Castiel’s grace, shining and shining until there’s nothing left Castiel can find to heal — until Castiel’s fire has chased every phantom night on a motel bathroom floor away.

When he releases Dean, Castiel staggers. He lands on the floor himself, sitting down hard, and his back hits the doorframe. He feels dizzy; with anger, with relief. With weakness, probably, though he’d do it again. He’d do it again.

“Holy fuck,” says Dean. He’s staring down at his own body, suddenly lucid. “Holy *fuck.* You — Cas?”

“You said,” Castiel mumbles. “You said he’d keep you safe.”

“What?”

And it wasn’t just last night. “Your father.” Dean’s body is a record — a lifetime of broken promises. “You said he was the best in the business.” Shattered ankle at age twelve. Bullet wound at fifteen.

“Yeah, well —” Dean shifts onto his knees, suddenly limber. “I mean, Cas, he *is,* but shit happens, you know? I woulda been in way worse shape if he hadn’t been there, I can tell you that much.”

“You said he would keep you safe.” He’s echoing himself now. He feels like he’s falling down a long, dark tunnel.

“And now I’m telling you — Cas. Cas, are you okay?”

Castiel blinks. Dean is kneeling between his legs, close; he must have moved across the floor. His face is pale and wide open with worry. “There’s — Cas, there’s blood on your shirt.”

The vessel’s blood, soaking through the fabric of his sleeve. Castiel spent all night sitting there with him, while Dean was in danger. “Why didn’t you pray?”

“What happened? Are you hurt?” Dean catches one of Castiel’s hands in his, then both, squeezing hard. *“Cas.* Look at me.”

Castiel looks at him.

He always wants to look at Dean. “Watch over you,” he mumbles, but that’s not quite right. “Always look at you.” *He’s beautiful, with green eyes.*

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” Dean squeezes again, fingers digging into the points of Castiel’s pulse. “Castiel. Focus for me, okay? Are you hurt?”

Dean is worried about *him.* That’s not right; it’s supposed to be the other way around. But — Castiel pauses, and then answers truthfully. It takes him an effort to bring forth the words. “No. Not — maybe used too much grace.”

“Grace. That’s your power, right? What you used to heal me? You dumb fuck.” The insult sounds strangely affectionate. “Does it — will

it come back?"

"Yes. Takes time."

"Okay, next question. Whose blood is that?"

Castiel looks down, again, at his sleeves. "Vessel."

Dean's frowning. "You mean — your vessel? The body you're in?"

"No." Castiel shakes his head. Why is communicating so hard? Everything feels fuzzy. "Not me. Archangel. Maybe two." He'd forgotten that — he remembers it now; the weird sense he had, when he first felt their presence, that the signal was doubled. Maybe that's what overcame the watchman's physical form.

"Okay — okay." Dean bites his lip. He looks lovely like this, close; Castiel's glad he healed him. "This vessel — are they okay? Do they need help?"

The words bring Castiel crashing down from his moment of warmth. "No. Dead."

Dean sucks in a breath. "Did you —?"

Castiel shakes his head. He would never. He needs Dean to know he would never. "No," he's saying, and he realizes he's saying it over and over again; "no, no, —"

Time might slip from him. "No," he tries to say, again, and — "Okay," Dean murmurs, soothing. "All right, big guy. I'm thinking — I'm thinking you need some rest. That sound all right? We're just gonna — gonna — here, *up.*"

He loops one of Castiel's arms over his shoulders — and he's standing, dragging Castiel with him. He's surprisingly strong. His skin is warm. Castiel gets lost in that, a little, and suddenly they're in the main room; Dean is making an annoyed huff at the state of the door. But when he tries to deposit Castiel in the neatly made bed — John's bed — Castiel refuses to let go.

"No." He musters the dignity to add, "That one."

Dean rolls his eyes, but his lips twitch. "Well, okay, you can steal my bed." He's depositing Castiel slowly down into it. "Weirdo. I'm just gonna jerry-rig this door, okay? Then we can both get some shuteye,

and — and figure out what next."

Castiel watches as Dean re-seats the doorknob. It won't keep the room secure, but from the outside it might look all right. Then he sets the deadbolt and moves toward the empty bed.

Castiel sits up. "No." He doesn't want anything of John Winchester's touching Dean. Touching either of them. He doesn't want Dean sleeping wrapped up in John Winchester's covers.

Dean looks exasperated. "Cas, there's two perfectly good beds."

And there's plenty of space in this one. "No," Castiel says again.

"All right, you freak." Dean shimmies out of his jeans by the side of the bed, leaving himself in only boxers. There are fine golden hairs on his thighs. Castiel wants to touch them. There's a place where a scar used to be and isn't anymore. "Quit staring and budge over."

Castiel budges over. He sort of quits staring, or at least he lets his eyelids lower. He turns on his side, though, so he can still see Dean, mere inches away. Dean's profile, silhouetted against the cracks of light from behind the curtains. Dean's lips and his nose and the curve of his cheekbone; the bob of his throat. Dean's chest, rising and falling, deeper as he slips into sleep.

I'll watch over you. That's what he promised, and that's what he'll do now — that's what he tells himself. Angels don't need sleep. He'll just lie here and watch Dean breathe.

And that's what he does, until his eyelids droop; until the steady rhythm lulls him into nothingness. Then he dreams of Dean breathing. Only, in the dream, Dean is watching him back.

When Castiel wakes, the curtains of the room are wide open, letting daylight spill in. Dean's sitting at the table, drinking coffee and reading a newspaper. When he sees Castiel looking at him, he grins. "Morning, sunshine."

Castiel sits up. His head feels very fuzzy; when he speaks, it comes out even deeper gravel than usual. "How long did I sleep?"

"Just about twenty-four hours." Dean folds up his newspaper, turning in his seat. "Woulda been real easy to ditch you, too. I think I deserve

a *thank you* for that."

"Thank you," Castiel says, dutifully. It causes an odd reaction in Dean; the teasing laughter in his grin fades. Castiel wonders if maybe he wasn't supposed to say *thank you* after all. If that was something Dean considered a joke.

"Anyway. This vessel you were talking about." Dean turns back to his paper. "Think I tracked him down, though it wasn't easy — I was looking for someone who died bloody, 'cause, well, you know. But then I figured, if Cas can heal *my* old scars, he can probably make somebody who died bloody look like they died clean. So I looked again. Night watchman, right? At the factory north of town."

Castiel feels a surge of panic. He's been asleep for twenty-four hours, and Dean has been — working the case? Anything could have happened. Does Dean not know what an *archangel* means? Does he not understand the danger they're in?

Of course he doesn't. He's just a human. He understands nothing.

"Did you go back there?" Castiel snaps. Anyone could have been watching, could have spotted him — anyone, anything. Demons, on the trail of an angelic signal that must have reverberated across the continent. Or worse — the archangels themselves. "Dean, did you go back there? We need to get as far away from here as possible. We need to —"

"Jesus, Cas, calm down. I went at night. No one saw me. Are you — are you all right?"

"I need to hide you." Castiel's not sure when he stood, how he moved across the room, but he's standing before Dean now — kneeling before him, reaching out to place his palms on Dean's ribs. "Hold still."

"Cas, what — ow! Fuck!"

Castiel ignores his protest. His grace is back, at least enough for this, but he can't afford a lapse in concentration. He closes his eyes and traces the sigils one by one, perfect; when Dean tries to squirm away, he anchors him in place by force, pressing harder. He can feel Dean shaking, feel his chest heaving, but it doesn't matter. Nothing matters except keeping him safe.

When he's done, when he drops his hands, Dean shoves his chair back violently. "What the fuck, Cas?"

“Listen to me,” Castiel tells him, urgent. “No angel can possess you without your consent. Do you understand? They have to ask, and you have to say yes. Don’t ever say yes, Dean. Promise me. If they find you —”

“You’re talking fucking crazy!”

“— they shouldn’t find you, not with those sigils on your ribs. No angel should be able to track you now, not even me. But if they do —”

“You telling me you’ve been carving fucking *sigils* in my *bones?”*

“Yes. Dean, please pay attention. Please promise me you won’t —”

“No!”

The shout takes Castiel by surprise. He stops short and looks at Dean properly.

There are tears in Dean’s eyes, spilling down onto his cheeks. His jaw is clenched, fists tight on the arms of the chair, wedged back in it as far as he’ll go. He’s still breathing hard, like he’s been running, breath hissing back and forth through his teeth.

“Dean,” Castiel says, shocked gentle. “Are you all right?”

“Do I fucking look all fucking right?”

Castiel evaluates him. “You’re having a panic attack. Your pupils are dilated and your heart rate is elevated. I’m sorry. I should have realized.”

“A panic attack,” Dean echoes. “A fucking panic — sure, great. That might as well happen.”

Castiel wants to touch him; he doesn’t think he should. “Have you experienced this phenomenon before?”

“What, the phenomenon of some guy I’ve known for three days carving his name in my ribs? *Nope,* that’s a new one.”

That isn’t what Castiel meant. “I didn’t carve my name. I told you — it’s Enochian sigils, to prevent —”

“To keep angels from finding me, yeah, got it.” Dean’s words are still short, clipped and furious, but they seem steadier now. “You ever think about *asking* first? Talk a big game about consent over there, ‘til

you realize you can just —"

Castiel says, "It was necessary —"

"— and what about yesterday? I mean sure, it's nice to not spend three weeks healing up, but I *didn't ask* for a brand new body. I didn't ask you to just — stroll in here and start turning me into your — little Barbie or something, all dolled up and ready for the prom —"

"Dean." Castiel feels close to tears himself; he didn't know he knew the sensation. "I'm sorry. I'm — I'm so sorry. I should have asked. I didn't think."

"Damn straight you didn't think." But Castiel has the sense that Dean's shoulders are shaking now with relief; that he's coming down, slowly. "I woulda *let* you. If you asked. I'm not a — I'm not a fucking baby, I don't mind a little pain. But you *didn't fucking ask."*

"I'm sorry."

Dean closes his eyes. "Damn it," he says. "Would you —"

He stops there. But Castiel understands. Whether it's instinct, he isn't sure, or maybe a thread of a prayer — but he scoots closer to Dean on the floor. He coaxes Dean's hands free of the chair arms, relaxing their death grip. And he holds them — like Dean did his last night. Just holds them, until Dean's racing pulse finally slows.

"Even my dad," he says, after a while. "Even my fucking *dad* tells you before he pops your arm in."

Castiel drops his head. "If you wanted to make me feel terrible," he admits, "that statement was an excellent choice."

"You really hate the guy, huh?"

Castiel shifts, uncertain. "He left you here. To tend to your wounds alone."

"He knows I can handle it."

"You said he'd hog-tie you in the trunk if he found out about me."

"That was — that was a joke." Now it's Dean who sounds uncertain.

But Castiel just nods. He isn't going to challenge Dean on this; not today.

“Maybe I did,” Dean says after a while. “Want to make you feel terrible.”

Castiel can accept that. “It’s understandable.”

Dean adds, “Maybe I don’t want you to feel terrible anymore.”

Castiel lifts his head.

Dean is looking down at him, and his eyes are dry; he looks in control of himself again. He’s still holding onto Castiel’s hands, though. He looks wrung out, but calm.

“I’m not sure it’s that simple,” Castiel confesses.

“Yeah, I get that.” Dean offers him a threadbare smile. “You should stop sitting on the floor, though. You should probably get up here and tell me about angels — and why you suddenly think they’re after me.”

Castiel finds that it’s difficult to unfold his logic. There’s so much that Dean doesn’t know — about Heaven, about Hell, about the wars that are fought between them. And there’s so much that *Castiel* doesn’t know, too. It surprises him sometimes, these lacunae — like when Dean asks *why* the angels wanted to rescue him from Hell in the first place. “Because God commanded it,” Castiel answers automatically, “because we have work for you,” but it feels like an answer by rote.

“Okay, what work?” Dean asks, and Castiel finds he isn’t ready with an answer.

Dean is working on getting the bloodstains out of Castiel’s clothes. Castiel suspects he could do it himself, with his grace, though he’s never really thought about how. He likes watching Dean scrubbing away at his shirt cuffs, though; he likes the way Dean keeps sneaking looks at Castiel’s bare chest.

What work? Castiel has an idea. He doesn’t like it, though. “Will you let me try something?” He remembers what Dean said about consent; “I’ll need to touch your wrist. You may feel a slight tingling.”

Dean glances at him, wary. “Nothing permanent?” he asks, but he’s already rolling up his shirt sleeve, extending his arm across the table for Castiel.

“Nothing temporary, even,” Castiel agrees, and sets two fingers to Dean’s pulse.

He knows in an instant he was right. He already knew he was right — his senses have spent too much time now tangled with Dean’s blood and bone to miss the obvious. He just — he just hoped he was wrong.

He releases Dean and sways in his seat. After a moment, Dean pulls his arm back. He touches the place Castiel did with damp fingers, then drops it into his lap. “So? Am I dying, doc?”

“All humans are,” Castiel answers, absent. Then: “No. Maybe not you. Not if I’m right. But it might be worse than dying.”

“Okay. You’re freaking me out here, man.”

Castiel swallows. “Vessels, they’re — not every human can be a vessel. It burns them out. The more powerful the angel, the greater the tax on the human body it occupies. When it comes to archangel vessels — few of them survive the experience with their minds intact.”

Dean nods. “Okay. So — you said that already, about the one at the factory. What about it?”

Castiel hesitates. He hates this. “Strong vessels, they — they run in families. Often attuned to the particular angel who intends to make use of them. Heaven will go to great lengths, sometimes, to — to prune and train those family trees.”

“Okay, and?”

“The vessel at the factory.” He hates this, he hates this. “He was a distant relation of yours. A third or fourth cousin, some number of times removed. He — you and he shared blood.”

It takes Dean a long, long moment to respond.

“So you’re saying,” he finally says, “I’m a vessel.”

“Not if you don’t say yes.”

“I’m a goddamned angel condom.” Dean glances up sharply. “For who? An archangel?”

“I suspect as much. I could venture a guess as to which one, but —”

He doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want to, he doesn’t want to.

“Well, venture it!”

It only makes sense. Who was there, when Castiel went tearing through time — who might have sent him? Who might be trying to reach them now, possessing and destroying a lesser vessel? Who might — who might there even be *two* of, if he followed Castiel here from five years in the future?

And why go to all this effort, present or future, for Dean, if not —

“Michael,” says Castiel. “I think you’re the Michael Sword.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The sword,” Dean says. “You call your vessels swords? That’s — man, that’s pretty fucking phallic.”

“I didn’t invent the term,” Castiel answers, stiff. “And no, the Sword is a term for Michael’s true vessel. His alone.”

“And you think I’m — that.” Dean shakes his head. “Jesus Christ. I *am* a freaking Barbie doll to you, huh? What, are you just — you the fairy godmother in charge of giving Cinderella her makeover before the big ball?”

Castiel has no idea what Dean’s saying. *“No,”* he answers anyway, forceful. “I told you. My mission is to save you.”

“Yeah, and it sounds like Michael probably gave you that mission! ‘Oh Castiel, please be a dear and save me some Dean Winchester!’”

“Michael does not sound like — like —” Castiel grits his teeth. “Like *that.”*

“Maybe not now,” Dean says grimly. “Wait ‘til I get done with him.”

“You are not *going* to get done with him,” Castiel snaps. “He is not going to find you. You are not going to say yes to him. You are not going to be his vessel! Do you hear me?”

He doesn’t realize how loud his voice has gotten, how close he is to Dean, until Dean’s blinking right in his face. His eyes look startled and, suddenly, soft. “Yeah, Cas,” he says after a long moment. “Yeah. Okay.”

“I don’t care who told me to save you. I don’t care why. If there’s one thing worth saving you from — it’s this.”

Dean nods, after a moment; he looks down at his hand. Then he says, “You’re in a vessel.”

The words are soft, without judgment. Still, they make Castiel sway like he’s been struck. He says, “Yes.”

“You gonna — when all this is done, you gonna pop back out of him? Send him back to his family and leave me to — leave me?”

I don’t want to. “I — if I can.” Castiel swallows. “I haven’t felt Jimmy’s presence since I arrived in this time. It — he might not have survived the journey.”

“You’re leaving either way, though.” There’s a stubborn set to Dean’s jaw. “You’re going back to your time. Or, or Heaven or whatever.”

No, Castiel wants to say. “Yes.”

“Then why shouldn’t I let Michael ride my ass?”

If there’s any question Castiel wasn’t expecting, it’s that one. “You — what?”

Dean’s smile has a bitter twist to it. “My dad doesn’t want me around. Sammy fucked off to California to get away from me. You’re about the only person who likes me bein’ — me. If you’re not even gonna stick around, what’s the point? Who the hell am I saying no for?”

Castiel’s chest hurts. “For yourself.” It sounds weak. “Say it for yourself.”

“Yeah. Right.” Dean snorts as he turns away.

Abruptly, Castiel’s misery turns to anger. He grabs Dean by the shoulder and spins him back around. “Do you know what happened, the last time Michael came to earth?”

Dean looks startled. He shakes his head.

“Whole cities were razed. Peoples burned from history. I was there; I helped. Do you think the Bible tells you everything? It tells enough. Michael is a warrior — a general. If he intends to walk among men again — it isn’t for a day trip.”

Dean’s shaking his head, again; his face looks troubled. “What are you saying, Cas?”

“I’m saying,” Castiel snaps, “say no for the millions of people who may well die if you don’t.”

They pack up and leave Colorado without much further delay. Castiel

is anxious to get away from the scene of the vessel's death, and Dean won't let him use his grace to move them; he might be right about that, Castiel thinks. His grace could attract attention. Right now, with Dean hidden the way he is — they might just be able to slip away into the broad belly of America, vanish on two-lane roads.

Dean makes Castiel sketch the warding sigils on a piece of paper for him — the same ones that are on his ribs. Then he copies them, in white paint, around the interior of the Impala's trunk; *"Fairly distinctive car,"* he mutters.

He keeps glancing up at Castiel as he works. It's hard to tell what's in his mind; his eyes are assessing, lingering, almost as if he's reassuring himself that Castiel's still there. Or maybe he's trying to catch a glimpse of his own fate — maybe he's searching for a hint of Jimmy Novak in Castiel's face.

It makes Castiel's heart beat hard and uncomfortable. They're a strange pair — Castiel, in sheep's clothing; Dean, the sacrificial lamb.

And yet Dean trusts him. Dean stayed, while Castiel slept; Dean held Castiel's blade in his hands and handed it back. Even now, Dean smiles at him, crooked, as if Castiel's attention is a good thing; he pats him on the shoulder as he passes, the sigils complete. Castiel's skin blazes under his trenchcoat. "All right. Let's load 'er up."

They don't speak for a while after they start to drive. They've talked themselves out, Castiel thinks, at least for now, and Dean has his window down, the music turned up loud. The combination creates a river of sound, enough to get lost in, and Castiel realizes after a while that he could roll his window down, too, so he does. That makes Dean shoot him a grin, and so Castiel tries tapping his fingers in time to the music, like Dean does. That feels good too.

After another hour or so — Dean changes the cassette in the tape deck twice — Dean leans over to yell in Castiel's ear. "Hey. You wanna see the world's biggest ball of twine?"

"You don't have to yell," Castiel yells back.

"What?"

"You don't have to yell. I'm an angel. I can hear you."

Dean pulls back and gives him a look that seems like it's trying for dismay and landing on fondness instead. "Okay. You wanna see the

world's biggest ball of twine?"

Castiel finds that he does want to see the world's biggest ball of twine. "We should probably avoid notable landmarks," he answers, reluctantly. "We'll be harder to track if we restrict ourselves to settings that resemble each other."

Dean blinks at him for a moment. "Tell you what, then. After we go to the world's biggest ball of twine in Kansas, we can do the world's biggest ball of twine in Missouri. And then the world's biggest ball of twine in Wisconsin. And then the one in Minnesota. Sound like a plan?"

"How can the world have four biggest balls of twine?" Castiel frowns. "And why are they all located in the American Midwest?"

Dean raises his eyebrows. "Sounds like the kind of question you might find some answers for. If we go see the world's biggest ball of twine."

Castiel *is* curious. "Yes," he says. "All right."

The world's biggest ball of twine — one of them — is located in a gazebo in Cawker City, Kansas.

It stands well over Castiel's vessel's head. It's not a perfect sphere — many years of additions have bellied out the sides. When Castiel puts his palm to it, he can sense the traces of the people who built it — the farmer who started it fifty years ago, setting aside used bits of baling twine for a rainy day; the townspeople who come together every year to work on it, and the visitors given scraps by locals passing in their trucks so that they, too, can help the twine ball grow.

"It's beautiful," he says. He means it. It's brown and squat and enormous, and it holds generations of stories in it.

Dean has his hands in his pockets, watching Castiel. "Can't say I've heard that reaction before."

"You've been here in the past?"

"Took Sammy a couple times." His face is hard to read. "I didn't think he'd remember it from when he was little, but he did. He told me it wasn't that big."

Castiel laughs. “It’s — enormous. It’s a church.”

Dean glances, briefly, at Castiel’s eyes, then down again. Something looks brittle in him.

“Dean,” says Castiel, on an impulse, “come here.”

That earns him a skeptical look, but Dean obeys, moving in close when Castiel shifts to make room. “This strand. Here.” Castiel touches it, and Dean does too, their fingers almost brushing. “It’s made of the fibers of an agave plant that grew in Brazil. The worker who harvested it had found out that morning she was going to be a grandmother. It was sold in a farm store in Mankato, where a cat liked to nap on top of it. The farmer who used it to bale hay passed away later that year, but his son was the one who cut the twine, when he needed the hay for a sick cow this spring. The cow survived. He thought he was going to add the twine to the twine ball himself, but he gave it to a young couple passing through last month instead — two women. He helped them tie it in. Now it’s connected all the way back, to all the other stories. And forward to the next ones.”

He watches Dean test the strand between finger and thumb. There’s a small frown on his face, but Castiel thinks it’s from focus, not distress. Finally, he lifts his eyes back to Castiel’s. “You can tell all that just by touching it?”

He’s close, so very close. In the full beam of Dean’s gaze, Castiel feels powerless, suddenly; like his knees and his wings might desert him. “Yes.” Dean’s looking at his mouth.

And the next moment Dean’s stepping back. He sways a little, shoulders hunching up high, and Castiel feels the loss of his closeness like a grief.

“I guess we should,” says Dean. “Keep moving.”

What is happening to me? Castiel wants to ask him. *What is this wanting? Do you know?*

“Of course,” he says instead, and follows Dean back to the car.

“So I guess you guys don’t mind gay people,” Dean says a while later.

Castiel takes a moment to attempt to parse the statement. He comes

up empty. “What?”

“You know, uh.” Dean looks uncomfortable. “God squad. A lot of — a lot of people down here say it’s sinful for, you know — two dudes or two chicks. But you said — about the lesbian couple earlier. And you said it was a church. So I guess you don’t mind.”

“Why would I mind that two people love each other?”

“Fuck if I know.” Dean closes his mouth for a moment, then adds, as if the question is bursting to get out of him, “What if they have sex?”

“What if they do?” asks Castiel, bemused.

“You don’t think that’s, like — evil, or whatever?”

It seems like a trick question. This must be one of Dean’s incomprehensible references; something beyond Castiel’s ability to track where his train of thought runs. He squints at Dean, then straight ahead through the windshield again. “No.”

“Okay.” Dean resettles his hand on the steering wheel and tilts a small smile at the blacktop stretching ahead of them. “Know a couple churches we could pay a visit to, though.”

They don’t visit any churches. When Castiel asks, Dean explains that he was joking, and that he doesn’t actually think that having Castiel smite a bunch of asshole preachers is a good way of laying low. Castiel wasn’t aware smiting was on the table.

They drive for hours. Dean sticks mostly to two-lane roads, straight and endless, the broken yellow ribbon of their centerline disappearing over the horizon. They pass small towns with brightly lit gas stations. They pass grain elevators, forking train tracks, enormous green combine harvesters combing through fields of corn. They pass rusting water tanks and empty churches left to the weather; they pass herds of cows switching their tails in the shade of a solitary tree.

They stop for dinner at a noisy roadhouse bar. There’s a neon sign out front of a cowboy on a bucking bronco; Castiel watches it for a moment as it flashes back and forth, the horse arching low and then rearing high, the cowboy waving his hat.

He will never cease marveling at human creation. “You’re incredible,”

he tells Dean. “You domesticate the horse, and invent a sport to pantomime the domestication of the horse, and then you capture inert gases from liquid air — gases that have drifted through the universe unchanged since they were forged at the heart of a sun — and you bend them to dance a depiction of that sport outside a public drinking house.”

Dean pauses at the door. “I can’t tell if that’s a compliment.”

Many of Castiel’s brethren would consider it the opposite. He is feeling increasingly alienated from his brethren. “It is,” he answers, and follows Dean inside.

Dean eats peanuts at the bar until his burger comes out. He orders two beers and slides one over to Castiel, so Castiel drinks it, dutifully, trying to sift through the flavors, the sensation of the bubbles on his tongue. Dean doesn’t seem that happy with his burger — he wrinkles his nose, and Castiel notes that it does look uninspiring, anonymous brown meat in a limp-looking bun, but Dean eats it all, regardless. “Hey,” he asks when the bartender comes back their way, “Juan still working in the kitchen?”

She shakes her head. “He moved on. A few months ago.”

“That explains it,” Dean mutters, and cracks another peanut, and orders another beer.

Castiel can feel eyes on him. The bartender’s linger for a moment every time she passes, but there are patrons watching him, too. Never for very long at a time, but they come back again and again.

Twice, Castiel turns in his seat to survey the room. He sees no signs of demonic or angelic presence. None of the watchers meet his eyes.

It’s a big room, though, full of noise and chaos. At one end, people are playing pool. There’s money sitting on the edge of the table, a crowd watching to see what happens, some of them holding their own pool cues. At the other, people are whooping as a girl climbs onto a mechanical bull. When its springs start to buck it back and forth, she screams; she manages to hold on for a couple twists and turns, then slides off to generalized laughter.

If someone in the bar has a particular interest in Dean and Castiel, they’re not showing it. Not right now.

Beside Castiel, Dean is watching his survey of the room. He has his

lips pursed, contemplative; then he drops his head with a twitch of a smile. Castiel glances out at the crowd again — did Dean notice something he didn't? — and it catches him off guard when Dean leans closer; when Dean murmurs into the space between Castiel's shoulder and his jaw, "They think you're paying me."

His breath ghosts across the skin of Castiel's neck, warm, and Castiel feels like he's on fire; he frowns. When he glances over at Dean, his lower lip is pink and shining, like he's been worrying at it with his teeth, and Castiel doesn't have any money, not aside from the few bills left in Jimmy Novak's wallet, but if he did he'd give Dean everything. Everything in the world.

"Why," he tries, and his voice comes out hoarse, "why would I be paying you?"

"You know." Dean sways a little closer. "We kind of stick out in a place like this. I mean — me." He points at his own chest, then at Castiel. "You. Older guy, business dress." He flicks the collar of Castiel's shirt, then lets his palm fall flat against Castiel's chest, below his collarbone. The heat of it blazes, even through Castiel's trenchcoat, and he swallows, hard. "Twitchy."

Castiel doesn't know what Dean wants. He clearly wants something; he's looking at Castiel, expectant, like he's waiting for the gears to click into place, and Castiel doesn't understand.

"Well." Dean slips from his bar stool; the motion seems even more fluid than usual, as if Dean's two beers have loosened some mechanism that usually holds his shoulders hunched tight. "Let's give 'em something to stare at."

He kisses Castiel on the cheek.

Before Castiel can react — before he can raise his hand to touch the skin there, or drop the motion half-complete, or turn to look at Dean fully, or ask him what he's doing, what is this, why — Dean's turning. He's sauntering away, something cocky in the tilt of his hips; he's asking the crowd clustered around the mechanical bull, "Hey — anyone got next ride?"

Castiel doesn't know if the hot swarm of bees in his head is a problem with his grace, or his vessel, or something else altogether. If there's some context he's meant to piece together, some thing everyone else in this bar apparently understands about Dean, or about him, or the two of them, it's beyond his grasp. He does know that he isn't going to

move from this spot. He does know that whatever Dean says, his performance on the mechanical bull is meant for Castiel, and Castiel alone.

There's the way he sheds his leather coat before he climbs on, shrugging and letting it fall off his shoulders and draping it over the nearest chair. He pulls his necklace off, too, the golden charm catching briefly on his forehead, and slips it in the pocket of the coat. Then there's the way his fingers flex on the handle at the bull's shoulders, testing the grip, and the easy swing of one leg over its back.

And then — and then there's his arm scything the air, like the cowboy on the neon sign. There's his hips, moving like they're on a swivel, meeting the bull's twists and turns, dancing. There's the lines of his body, the points of his ribs, delicate under fewer layers than normal, and it's with a weird surge of possessiveness that Castiel thinks, *I marked those.* He thinks, *I* should *have signed my name.*

There's also the look on Dean's face, though, and that isn't performance. It's utter focus; it's fierce delight. His eyes are on the bull's plastic ears, tracking its turns, and then his eyes are on Castiel's — through the crowd. The bull bucks once more — twice more — and in between, Dean winks.

Then it's done. The crowd is applauding, whoops of approval going up, and Dean is reclaiming his coat. He's slipping between onlookers, accepting claps on the back, and then he's making his way back to the bar. He's touching Castiel's arm, just above the elbow; "Wanna get out of here?"

He doesn't wait for Castiel's answer. He reaches into his pocket and counts out bills for a tip; then he turns to leave, and Castiel follows.

Of course he follows.

The air outside is humid and warm. The moon is out, nearly full, hanging low in the sky. Dean is moving with purpose, faster, around the back of the building, toward where they parked the Impala. He slips into shadows and out again, and Castiel hurries to keep up, until suddenly — suddenly Dean's wheeling around, and Castiel nearly stumbles into him.

Dean's face is a breath from his face. Dean's hand is catching his tie.

Dean's going to kiss him again.

The anticipation slams a shudder through Castiel's body; Dean's going to kiss him again. Dean's eyes are on his mouth, and Dean's going to kiss him again; Dean's fingers are curling under his shirt collar, brushing his skin.

They stand like that. For one long second, two; then Dean says, "Why do I go to Hell?"

The question is like a sudden drench of cold water.

They're still standing close; Castiel closes his eyes. He doesn't want to think about this beautiful man with his throat torn open. He doesn't want to think about Dean, torturing and being tortured; about the fragility in his face, the softness, quenched to steel.

"Cas." Dean's voice is hard; he takes a step back. "You know. Tell me."

Castiel sways. The night feels airless, without Dean's touch. "I don't know details."

"Tell me what you do know."

"You make a deal." Castiel can't open his eyes. "In exchange for your brother's life."

"Sammy?"

The word cracks. Castiel blinks back into the haze of the streetlight, and Dean's swaying in it. His harsh facade crumbles, has already crumbled; there's something desperate in the glitter of his eyes. "Sam — is he — back in the life? Does he *die?"*

"I don't know," Castiel confesses, honest; "I think so. I'm sorry."

"It's probably my fault." Dean's the one closing his eyes now, fumbling against gravity. "He — does it work, though? Is he — when you left, is he — alive?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Dean's shoulders slump, releasing their tension all at once; his breath gusts out in a sigh. "Okay. That's — that's okay, then. I mean, it's my job, right? Look after — look after my little brother."

I wish you wouldn't have a job. Not for your brother or your father or Michael or even for me.

“Thanks for telling me, Cas.” Dean’s voice is quiet, sincere.

And Castiel wants to hit him, suddenly. He wants to grab Dean and shake him, until he’s angry too, until — *oh,* this feeling in Castiel is *anger.* Or fury, or wrath, and Dean should feel it too. Dean should rage against this, against the story that’s been written about him; Dean should want to *hurt* someone.

“What do they think I’m paying you for?”

His voice comes out cold. It seems to catch Dean around the waist, startle him out of his sway, or into a new one; he says, “What?”

“What do they think I’m paying you for?” And Castiel is advancing on him, nearly without telling his feet to move; Dean stumbles back one step, two, and hits the pole of the streetlight. He arches back, meeting Castiel’s eyes, and his lips are parted. Castiel leans close.

“Sex,” Dean breathes. “They think you’re paying me for sex.”

“Have you done that before?” Castiel touches Dean’s jaw, then the back of the neck, and Dean trembles when he squeezes there, lightly; Dean seems ready to melt into his hands. “Sex for money?”

“A — a few times.” Dean’s eyes are fixed on Castiel’s mouth again, hypnotized.

“Would I have to pay?”

“Shit, Cas.” Dean’s body shudders; he arches his ribs, just like he did on the bull. “I’d do you for free.”

“I see.” Castiel touches his thumb to Dean’s mouth, and feels Dean stutter a breath against his skin; he presses down on the pad of Dean’s lower lip, grazes Dean’s teeth, his tongue.

Dean’s pupils are blown wide. What would he do if Castiel dove two fingers past his lips? Would he open for them, suck on them, beg for more? What would he do if Castiel squeezed the skin at the back of his neck and told him to kneel?

Dean tries to nip Castiel’s thumb as he withdraws it. Castiel drags it across Dean’s lower lip instead, watching the swell of it, the shine; then he bends close and kisses Dean on the mouth.

He feels the streetlight shatter, feels the shower of sparks.

Mostly, though, what he feels is *Dean;* the tiny responses and wordless sounds of him. The way his breath hitches in his body, the way his lips part; the way he gives and gives and invites Castiel in. Castiel could do anything with him. Anything to him. Dean is *his,* name or no name on his bones.

When he pulls back, Dean is watching him through dazed eyes. He quirks a smile, slow and sure, a smile that says, *Yes, you got it right.* A smile that says, *We should do that again.*

Castiel very much wants to do it again.

"I have to go," he says. He doesn't wait. Doesn't look for the confusion on Dean's face, or the hurt, or the beginnings of protest; doesn't give Dean a chance to tell him to stay.

He simply blinks himself away.

Jimmy and Amelia Novak live in a white two-story house in Pontiac, Illinois.

It feels strange, standing here on their front walk. There's the place, at the foot of the steps, where Castiel first possessed Jimmy; there, through the window, is the stove where Jimmy proved his faith. There is the couch where he sat for long hours, listening to Castiel's words, thinking on them. Where his wife told him he needed to get help.

Castiel expects his vessel to have a stronger reaction. He expects *something* — a pang of recognition, of loss, even of fear. But Jimmy Novak's body is quiet.

He blinks inside.

The house is empty. A few things out on the kitchen counter, the evidence of sandwich-making earlier in the day; there's a half-finished mug of tea on the coffee table in the living room. Castiel walks the stairs, trying on Jimmy's tread, and they creak under his feet.

The girl's room is pink and purple and outfitted with toys, stuffed animals in every square inch of available space. Jimmy and Amelia's room is messier than the rest of the house, lived-in; rumpled covers, clothes on the floor. A few dresses, still on their hangers, draped over the back of an armchair. There's a card, a little curled with age, on the nightstand — a child's drawing, with rough scrawl across the bottom:

Happy Father's Day!

Castiel took Jimmy away from this.

That's the thing that seems harder and harder to forget, as the horror of losing Dean grips him. If possession is a death sentence, if Dean must say no to Michael at any cost — what about Jimmy? Castiel made off with his body — and Jimmy consented, yes, but Amelia didn't. Claire — the daughter, that's her name — Claire didn't. Castiel stole a man they loved from them, and now he feels ready to murder anyone who does the same to Dean.

I have doubts.

The revelation is so overdue it almost startles him into a laugh. Of course he has doubts; this whole journey has been one long blossoming doubt. Dean is a vessel, and Castiel doesn't want him to be.

Save Dean Winchester. Those are his orders, and that's what he's attempting, though he's starting to believe he'll have to defy all of Heaven and Hell to see it done.

Whose orders are they, though? Michael's? That doesn't make sense; not if Michael intends to possess Dean. Dean's voice rings in his head as if he's standing next to Castiel: *Save me, sure. Michael just doesn't want Hell's sloppy seconds. He probably sent you to keep me all fresh and clean for him.* But Castiel shakes his head; that's not right. It must not have been Michael who sent him here.

Could it be — God?

Castiel closes his eyes.

"Please," he prays. Jimmy's voice sounds loud against the walls of his own bedroom. "Show me a sign, if I am on the right path. Give me —"

He falters. He is too demanding. He asks too much; of God, of Dean.

When he opens his eyes, they catch on a photo frame.

The picture behind the glass is of Claire and Amelia. They're leaning together, both grinning; the cake in front of Claire has a candle that says *5*. She's gap-toothed and blonde and happy, so happy, and —

Jimmy Novak's face hovers ghostly between them. It's Castiel's face; a

reflection on the glass. It looks gaunt, and sick with guilt. It looks like Castiel feels inside.

A sign. It's not the one he wanted.

Slowly, he moves Jimmy's body across the room. He drops it into the armchair.

And he leaves it — incrementally, painstakingly. These are the hands that touched Dean's mouth and his throat; Castiel leaves them. This is the chest that caught when Dean looked at him; Castiel leaves it. These are the eyes that seem to hold Dean spellbound, this is the mouth — not his. None of them belong to him.

His true form feels enormous, after so long in a human body. Wings upon wings fill Jimmy's bedroom; his eyes make the ceiling lights buzz bright. It doesn't feel like a relief, though; he feels naked. Exposed. Too much and too little, all at the same time.

Jimmy's body lies there, slumped and unmoving. Castiel tells it, in the thousand tongues that are his true voice: *Wake up.*

Jimmy doesn't move.

Again, Castiel tries: *WAKE UP!*

A glass on the nightstand shatters.

And there's nothing. No response, no movement, no breath; no glow of Jimmy's soul.

The body in the armchair is empty.

And there's a sound from downstairs — a key in a lock, an opening door. Castiel tries to suppress his panic. If the neighbors heard something — if they find Jimmy like this —

But the voices downstairs are familiar ones.

That's Amelia's laugh, as the door closes. And that's — the half-murmured response —

Castiel eases his awareness out onto the landing.

And there, at the foot of the stairs — he's a fool. It's 2003, of course; of course Jimmy Novak is here too.

His face is lit up with laughing. He's been drinking; they both have, movements a little loose. Amelia's in a dress, a strappy, backless one, and when Jimmy leans to kiss her bare shoulder she laughs and squirms away. "Jimmy, we can't — my mom will be here soon with Claire —"

Jimmy bows, retreating a step. "Dance with me, Mrs. Novak?"

"Oh, shut up." She kisses his mouth instead, twining fingers at the back of his neck, pulling him close; he makes a pleased sound in his throat and follows.

He's different — he's so *different* from Castiel. The way he holds his hands. The way he kisses; the tilt of his chin. Castiel glances back into the bedroom, at the body slumped there — Castiel's body — and it's *different.* It doesn't look like Jimmy's. It looks like his.

He can't leave it here. It will ruin their lives, if they find it; it will give them questions they can never answer.

He did ask for a sign.

It feels good, when he slips back into the body. It feels like home.

Maybe it is. Maybe it's really his; he's sure now he's the only one in it. There's so much about this he doesn't understand.

One thing he does, though — when he goes back to Dean, he will go as himself. Only himself, for however long he's been given this journey — for however long he can stay.

Of course, when he blinks back to the roadhouse, Dean is gone.

He's gone, and the Impala's gone with him. He's gone into nothingness, untraceable, the marks on his ribs hiding him as surely from Castiel as from any other angel in heaven. He's taken the opportunity Castiel always knew he would, or should, from the moment Dean woke up to a stranger in his motel room watching him sleep; he's only been humoring Castiel, these past few days. Keeping him happy until he can make his escape.

Now Castiel's given him the means. He's given him the opportunity. He shouldn't expect anything different.

His vessel might be his and only his, at least for the moment — but Dean isn't.

Dean is gone.

Castiel could perform a systematic search. Dean doesn't have much of a head start on him; Castiel is an angel. He could use his wings; he could spiral out from the roadhouse, circling the plains of America, checking every back road for a pair of headlights belonging to a black 1967 Chevrolet Impala. He could listen for the strains of Led Zeppelin — that's the music Dean likes. He could find him, maybe, with enough effort and time.

But Dean doesn't want to be found.

Castiel has given Dean everything he can. The protection on his ribs; everything he knows of what's to come. He's told Dean to say no. He has to believe Dean listened to him.

Dean's voice in his head says, *You're about the only person who likes me bein' — me.*

But Castiel kissed Dean, and left him, and then Dean left in return. Maybe Dean never even wanted to kiss him; maybe it was all a smokescreen, a performance, to get Castiel to give Dean a chance to run.

He could have run earlier. He could have run when Castiel was asleep, exhausted; his ribs weren't marked yet, so Castiel would have found him, but Dean might have tried it nonetheless. He could have distracted Castiel at any point, slipped away like he did in Des Moines. He didn't.

He could also pray to Castiel if he wanted to be found.

That, in the end, is the inevitable fact: Dean knows how to make contact. Castiel doesn't. So if Dean isn't praying — whatever else Castiel tries to tell himself makes no difference. Dean doesn't want him, or anything to do with him, at all.

Castiel goes to the twine ball in Minnesota. It's behind glass, untouchable; it hasn't been worked on in twenty-four years. It's big, but not as big as the one in Cawker City; the signs around it talk about Francis Johnson, and call it the world's biggest ball of twine created by one man. He sits through the night there, watching the shadows change.

He goes to Wisconsin. The twine ball there is in a backyard shed, resting on cinderblocks; a man works on it while Castiel watches, invisible. He uses shorter lengths of twine, pulling them tight and tying them off; this ball is dense, multicolored. *World's Heaviest Ball of Twine,* says a hand-painted sign. Another describes the day God appeared to the twine-winder and told him to stop drinking.

Would he believe there's an angel watching him now? Castiel imagines he would. They have a great deal in common, Castiel and this man; they both have missions, simple ones, though the execution of them seems Sisyphean, eternal. They both labor alone.

Castiel goes to Missouri.

The twine ball here isn't housed, like the others, in a simple gazebo or a shed. Castiel touches down before a lurid facade, a cartoonish depiction of a building cracked by an earthquake; *Ripley's Believe it or Not!* says the rooftop sign.

Inside, the walls are even more brightly colored than outside. Yellow handrails divide running children from the displays — an enormous roll of toilet paper. A sculpture made of camel bones. A taxidermied two-headed calf. There's a diving helmet, hanging from the ceiling, that the children can put their heads into.

Castiel finds himself smiling; he wants to laugh. This place is a celebration of humans in all their strangeness, a paroxysm of oddity. It's lovely. He doesn't understand it, just like he doesn't understand half the sentences that come out of Dean's mouth, but — it makes him think of magpies, and their relentless desire to accumulate strange and shiny things.

The twine ball is near the exit. This one is made of nylon, not sisal; lighter-weight, inexpertly wound. A sign claims that it's the largest in the world, certified by a beer company for some reason. It was created by a man in Texas, then brought here, and Castiel can tell it's settled since then — it's smaller than it claims. It's impressive, but it's flimsy.

He sits for a while and watches the twine ball. Visitors flow by it; some fascinated, some indifferent. He studies the colors, the patterns of the individual strands.

He can see why Dean likes these places.

They're works of art; the twine balls, and the people who create them, and the people who preserve them, and the people who come to see.

They're a marvel both quotidian and incomprehensible; a simple thing done long enough to make something stupendous and strange. They're the product of decades of thankless toil — and yet they're not quite thankless. Sooner or later, if you wind enough twine, people start to care.

Castiel almost doesn't recognize the man moving awkwardly through the room until he's standing right in front of him.

Dean doesn't see him. Castiel is invisible, still, a spot of silence on a bench that no one quite decides to sit on; he lets the crowd flow around him. When he sees Dean, he rises, stretches out a hand — but he hesitates before he lets it land on Dean's shoulder.

Dean is gripping the railing by the twine ball tight, bowing his head, eyes squeezed closed.

"Hey, Cas. Uh, Castiel." His voice comes out soft and choked, barely above a whisper. "I'm — I've never done this praying thing, so. Sorry if I'm fucking it up. I just thought —"

His voice rolls through Castiel's ears and over his grace. His voice is the best thing Castiel's ever felt; he wants to stretch into it like a cat. He feels phantom feathers ruffle. He wants Dean, speaking like this, into the core of him; he wants him to say anything. He wants him to read the informational signs.

"— I mean, you left, and I don't wanna bug you. You've got more important shit than my sorry ass to be dealing with, that's for sure. I just, uh —" He bites his lip. "Fuck. I just wanted to say — sorry if I did something wrong, and — and I figured — I'm at that twine ball, if you still want to see it. The next one, in Missouri. It's at — um, Ripley's Believe It or Not —"

"Hello, Dean," says Castiel.

Dean wheels.

He sees Castiel — visible again — and abruptly grabs the railing behind for balance; he closes his eyes in obvious relief. Then he opens them again, drinking Castiel in, raking over him — Castiel can't help a small smile. "Jesus fuck," says Dean, and then, "I thought you were *gone,* you bastard."

Castiel says, "I'm sorry."

“That’s okay.” A family with four children passes between Dean and Castiel, giving them odd looks; Dean ignores them. “Are you — are you all right?”

“Of course.” The question surprises Castiel. He never — in all of his contemplations, he never thought Dean might worry about *him.*

“What — happened?” The question is halting; Dean’s face shows dread.

“A crisis of conscience,” Castiel answers, honestly.

But his words make something in Dean crumple. He looks down, and he bites his lip. “Right. Yeah. I mean, I get it. I’m sorry.”

“There is nothing for you to be sorry for.” Castiel smiles at him, helpless; he loves looking at Dean. He loves the spark of embarrassed hope in Dean’s eyes, the way his mouth curves when he looks up at Castiel.

For a moment, they just hang there, watching each other’s eyes. Then Dean clears his throat and gestures with one thumb over his shoulder. “So, this is, uh — this is the shittiest twine ball. And the only one you have to pay twenty bucks to go see.”

“I did not pay twenty bucks,” Castiel informs him.

Dean’s lips twitch. “Yeah, me neither. It’s the thought that counts, I guess.”

“I did not think about paying twenty bucks, either.”

Dean laughs. It feels good to make Dean laugh; it feels good when he puts his hand on Castiel’s shoulder and tips his head close. “I missed you, man. Fuck. Let’s get out of here.”

Castiel agrees, “Let’s.”

In the car, Dean pulls out a pad of yellow paper. It has some notes scribbled on it, in swift capitals; “Heard something on the radio on the way over,” he says, drawing a finger down the page. “Mysterious disappearances, New Jersey Pine Barrens. I figured — wanna go check it out?”

Castiel tilts his head, studying the page. *Jersey Devil??* reads one note,

and another says, *F, 40s, walking the dog.* In the margin, in parentheses: *(Springsteen).*

“A hunt?” he asks.

“Yeah.” Dean’s eyes are on Castiel’s face; he looks nervous. “What d’you think? You in?”

“I am — in,” Castiel repeats, careful. The atmosphere in the Impala feels taut, though not unpleasantly so; Dean seems almost — shy. Castiel understands that. They’re in each other’s company by choice this time. It feels like delicate new ground.

“Great.” Dean hesitates, key in the ignition. “I mean, uh. I don’t mean to — maybe we could hit up the other twine balls after? If you want.”

He’s starting the car, pulling out into traffic. Castiel considers dishonesty. “I visited them already,” he confesses instead. “I apologize for doing so without you.”

“You — what?” Dean’s distracted, hands on the wheel; he pulls the Impala right at the last second to avoid colliding with an oncoming ice cream truck. “When?”

“After I returned to the roadhouse. You were gone. I —” He stops. *They made me think of you. They were a poor substitute.* “I would enjoy returning to them with your company, though.”

Dean shoots him a sidelong glance. “Cas,” he says, “you are so fucking weird,” but his voice sounds fond, so that’s all right.

Castiel has spent the last day winging around the country on his grace; the rumble of the Impala’s engine through the seat feels like home. He watches Dean’s hands on the steering wheel, Dean’s eyes on the road; they turn onto the ramp for the highway. Dean’s spent his whole life like this, in this car, driving from somewhere to somewhere else; Castiel wonders how many times he’s visited each twine ball. He wonders what Dean thinks about when he sees them. What pulls him back.

As if Castiel were speaking out loud, Dean clears his throat. “You know, those things — the twine balls — I always figured Sammy would like them. I mean, that kid’s like a walking encyclopedia, you know? Loves correcting you about shit. I thought he’d want to measure them himself.”

He stops there, so Castiel asks, “Did he?”

Dean laughs, a little harsh. “Nah. Thought they were boring.”

Castiel watches his face. “You miss him.”

He sees surprise catch around Dean’s mouth, then softness; then he drops his chin. “Yeah. I mean — course I do.”

Castiel has the sense that Dean is not very accustomed to answering questions about himself.

So he keeps asking them, as the miles stretch eastward. They cross the Mississippi, and Dean tells Castiel about his childhood; about growing up in motels, sneaking into movie theaters, learning to shoot a gun. They drive through corn fields, and Dean catalogues the monsters he’s come up against, and the ones he hasn’t; he tells Castiel some stories about ghosts. They stop at a diner, and Dean frowns when Castiel asks about his mother, but he talks anyway — about the memories he has of her, hazy and beautiful. About the way his father says her name.

They spend the night at a motel; this one is nautical-themed, anchors and buoys decorating the walls. Castiel sits at the table by the window and watches Dean sleep — watches the light of the semi truck headlights sweep through the blinds. He thinks, *You grew up so beautiful, even with that loss through the middle of you. You grew up around it.* He thinks, *You grew up into the shape your father made for you — the shape of a weapon — but you filled it with light.*

He wonders what Dean would say if he told him that. He’d probably squint up at Castiel and ask, *So you think I’m a killer donut?*

Castiel smiles down at his hands.

The next day, they drive to the end of the plains, and into rumpled folds of green mountains. The highway cuts through the rock in long tunnels and breaks free again, and Castiel tells Dean about his own life, a little; about the making of things. About the angels in his garrison and his battles in the time mankind was young. Dean listens in soft fascination, and later, when Castiel asks him about the music he plays, he launches into his own tales of mythic glory — of Led Zeppelin, of Jimi Hendrix, of the Rolling Stones.

They reach the ocean as the sun is setting. It’s somewhere behind them, lost in the clouds, but Dean drives them to the beach anyway, parks the Impala among cedar-shingled houses on asphalt scuffed with

sand. They walk down to the water and watch the moon rise, hefting itself slowly up out of the waves, and Castiel takes off his shoes when Dean tells him to and gets his pant cuffs wet in the surf.

When he turns around, Dean is lying with his back in the sand, watching him. There are teenagers shouting somewhere nearby, laughing about the beer they stole from their parents, kicking a soccer ball. A car horn honks from the road behind the dunes. Dean is looking at Castiel like he's the only thing in the world.

Castiel could lean down and lift him — lift him up like he's nothing. He could carry Dean away, down the bright shifting path of the moonlight on the water — away from his father, from the monsters and demons of the earth, from the ghosts.

But not away from Michael.

He feels the smile on his face the moment before he feels it flicker; he sees Dean's eyes tense when it does. *Don't,* he wants to say. *Don't let my worry touch you.* But it's Dean's to worry about, too.

Dean breaks into an empty house for them to spend the night. It's halfway through an abandoned renovation, plastic sheeting hanging from the ceiling, a half-full can of wood stain on the floor. The upstairs rooms are untouched, though, and Dean lays out his bedroll against the wall away from the window, where the orange light slanting in from the streetlight outside won't touch his face. The shadows of tree branches move across the floor in the wind, and Castiel sits with his back to the other wall, folding his hands.

He sees Dean crack an eyelid open. "You gonna sit watch over there all night?"

"Yes."

Castiel expects a small protest; some sort of eyeroll or muttered comment. But Dean just nods and turns over. A few moments later, he's asleep.

The weeks they spend on the Jersey Shore are good ones.

Dean teaches Castiel how to work a case. They read newspapers and visit libraries and call witnesses, and one afternoon Dean takes Castiel to a Kinko's and makes him an FBI badge so they can talk to the local

police. They chase strange occurrences through the Pine Barrens, following up with a woman who seems very concerned her cat food keeps going missing; with another whose property includes an old house — once a tavern — that makes weird noises at night; with a man whose laundry lines got stolen and tangled in a tree.

The neighbors of the missing woman all have different stories. All of them agree the Jersey Devil took her. Some of them tell stories about a large, bat-like thing in the woods. Dean and Castiel follow leads through tangled trees, scratching their faces on pine needles and wandering into swamps, and there *are* strange footprints, broken twigs — signs of something out there. The Jersey Devil seems as likely a candidate as any.

It didn't take Rebecca Harrison, though. She turns up on the fourth day to ask them, exasperated, to stop kicking up a fuss; she owes some money to some dangerous people, she says, and wanted to disappear. Her neighbors all know, though, and one of them had the bright idea of blaming it on the local monster, and now she's on national radio news — "That's true," Dean says, wry — and she'd just like it to stop so she can vanish in peace.

So Dean and Castiel set about proving the Jersey Devil is a hoax. They lead local reporters on a chase through the woods to an abandoned shed — only to find molds for creating three-toed footprints inside. A tape player ready to cycle a blood-curdling scream. An enormous stash of "stolen" cat food.

There's a little bit of media attention, and then it dies down again. The police visit the shack. Rebecca thanks them and changes her name. And if Dean and Castiel see a bat-winged shadow one evening in the tavern attic, enormous across the moonlit floor, well — that's no one's business but their own.

They have a lot of time for other things, too, though. That's the thing about laying a false trail, Dean tells Castiel — you can't be too flashy about it. You've got to lay low, let things unfold. So they spend evenings on the beach, or at pool tables where Dean wins money, or at a casino where he manages to not quite lose it. They drive north along the shore one night to a town where Dean says Bruce Springsteen used to play and watch a very loud concert inside a building called the Stone Pony. Dean tells Castiel the music is shit, but he seems delighted anyway, and he sways warm against Castiel in the press of the crowd.

At night, Castiel watches over Dean. The shifting shadows make his face look vulnerable, like something shaped from glass. Sometimes Castiel thinks about kissing him again. Mostly he thinks that during the day, though — when Dean frowns over his research and nibbles on a pen. When he shoots a particularly caustic incomprehensible comment at a police officer. When he grins at Castiel; when he bumps shoulders with him; when he lays his head back against Castiel's clavicle, for one brief dreamlike alcohol-soaked moment, during a slow song at the Stone Pony. Castiel's hands rise without thought to Dean's hips, and Castiel's eyes track to the line of Dean's throat, to his lips, and then the song and the moment are over, but they leave him aching for days.

Save Dean Winchester. The words feel farther and farther away now. Lately, what he wants to do is treasure Dean Winchester; to show him he's worthy of love.

There's one day when Dean says, "Hey. Will you come check on something with me?"

He looks nervous. His hands are flexing uncharacteristically, and there's a line between his eyebrows; he won't quite look Castiel in the eye. "Of course," says Castiel.

Dean drives them an hour north. They park beside a curb outside a peeling white picket fence and sit there for a while — one hour, two — before a screen door bangs and a child comes rushing out, nearly tripping over the tiny dog at her feet. It lets out a shrill yip and she says, "Here, boy — fetch!" and throws something across the yard.

Castiel can only catch glimpses of them through the gaps in the fence, but he thinks the dog looks white, with tan splotches and a bright pink collar. The girl is wearing basketball shorts and a baggy t-shirt. Dean has his chin nearly buried in his collar, peering past Castiel; he says, "They look good, right?" and then, "We should get out of here before someone thinks we're a couple creepers," and he pulls away.

Castiel thinks he sees the girl lift her head at the rumble of the Impala's engine. He's not sure, though. He asks Dean, on the drive back, and Dean admits that he found the dog in a storm drain eight months ago; smuggled it shivering into his motel and fed it pieces of burger for a few days, until he saved a family from a poltergeist and thought they might take it off his hands. "Told 'em it wouldn't make much of a guard dog," he adds, smiling, "and the girl told me I was full of shit. It's — it's good to see they're still — you know."

Later, he says, “Sammy’s the one who always wanted a dog. I didn’t. Goddamn nightmare cleaning dog shit out of a motel room.”

Still later, he adds, “I don’t think Sammy wanted a chihuahua, though.”

In between, he keeps the music turned up loud. In between, Castiel watches his face. It rains, a little, and the drops on the windshield halo reflections of red traffic lights against a gray sky.

They’re nearly home — if a building they’re squatting in counts as “home” — when Dean’s phone rings.

He fumbles it out of his pocket without looking. “Hello?”

Castiel sees his face go still — inanimate. He hears John Winchester’s voice rumble over the line.

“Yes, sir,” says Dean. “Yes, sir,” again. He hangs up the phone.

He darts a look at Castiel out of the corners of his eyes, the barest of glances. He wets his lips. “Guess we’re going to Minnesota.”

It comes out like a question. Like a question about Castiel; *Wherever you go, I’ll go with you,* Castiel thinks, and then he says it, because it’s true.

Dean turns a little pink. He doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t turn them back toward the empty house to gather the scant few things they left there — just peels, tires squealing, onto the nearest exit, and points the Impala west.

Chapter End Notes

I learned so much about twine balls for this fic. You can too.

ETA: AMAZING FANART ALERT please behold Castiel beholding a twine ball!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Feels like I should put a blanket warning on this chapter for generalized Dean Issues and This Bitch John Winchester (derogatory).
>
> There are a couple more specific warnings in the end notes for those who want them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The thing about Dean Winchester, Castiel thinks, is — there are many things about Dean Winchester.

There are *so* many things about Dean Winchester. There's his music and his movies and the way he can talk for an hour about his car; there's the way he loves his brother, three thousand miles away, the painful spiky proud letting-go. There's his jokes and his references and the way he sometimes goes quiet when he makes one, eyes close on Castiel as if he expects him to react one way or another to the news that Dean likes watching cowboy-boot-wearing doctors on TV.

Dean knows every seedy diner and backroad bar in America. He's been to every twine ball, every tourist theme park, every oversized sculpture of a dinosaur, and he'll listen when Castiel tells him how the artist got dinosaurs all wrong. He can lure anyone into losing a game of pool, and he can make anyone want him; Castiel thinks of the crowd at the roadhouse in Kansas, the bartender in Des Moines. Dean saves chihuahuas and kills monsters and fakes a fake of a Jersey Devil that might be real, and sometimes when he bites his lower lip or tilts up a grin or frowns over the puzzles page of a newspaper he's scanning for cases, Castiel thinks he would burn down the whole world for this man.

The thing about Dean Winchester is that there are so many things about Dean Winchester, and his father's voice is a tide to wash all of them away.

Dean after he hangs up the phone is vacant. His eyes are calm; he drives like a demon is after them, but his hands don't clench on the wheel. His shoulders are settled, his movements are sure.

He looks like a vessel.

Castiel has seen this so many times. He'd almost forgotten, from the old times — when he and his brethren used to take over whole armies at once. When he'd glance down the line and watch each human soldier's face smooth, back straighten, the dreads and discomforts of mortal consciousness slipping away; the way they'd move their arms, too easy, without fear of pain.

This is what Dean will look like if Michael takes him. When Michael takes him. Castiel was a fool for ever thinking he could prevent that outcome. Dean's trained for it; bred for it. His whole life he's been vacating his own body to make it an instrument for someone else.

Castiel wants to hit him. He wants, for miles and miles, to scream, *Stop it. Look at me. Come back.* He wants to say it in his true voice, to *force* Dean to listen, but Dean — the Dean Castiel knows — wouldn't like it if Castiel shattered the windows of his car.

About halfway through Pennsylvania, Dean says, "I figure if we drive straight through we can make it there tomorrow by dark."

They're the first words he's spoken in hours. Often, Castiel's learned, Dean likes to fill silences — with music, with conversation. The tape on the tape deck ran out before they crossed the Delaware River. It's been whirring and clicking quietly ever since.

The blood feels hot in Castiel's veins. He says, "No."

Dean glances over at him. His lips part, startled, a sign of life; "You — d'you think it's safe to zap us there? I mean, it won't be too conspicuous?"

Castiel hasn't heard a whisper of archangel since they left Colorado. But he says, again, "No."

Dean throws a hand up in frustration, and Castiel loves him, loves and hates him; "Well then, what, man? We gotta get there as fast as we can, my dad said — my dad said this thing's after kids. And he needs my help, so —"

Castiel loves him. "You need sleep."

"I can sleep when I'm dead," Dean mutters, but he doesn't look convinced; Castiel loves him. He loves the dark circles under Dean's eyes and the irritation at the corners of his mouth and his stupid obstinacy. He loves him, and he's so angry at him he could throw him through a wall.

“I can *make* you rest,” he says instead, and Dean mutters something like, “Jesus Christ,” and “fucking angels with their fucking dominance complexes,” but he gets off at the next exit, all the same.

They eat in tense silence at a taqueria by the side of the highway. Dean seems to order Castiel the messiest food he can out of spite. Castiel licks sauce off his fingers and glares; Dean stuffs his mouth full and lowers his chin as he chews. At the motel, Dean shoves his duffel into Castiel’s chest like he’s expecting Castiel to carry it. Castiel complies, because of course of complies, because he’s never going to reject Dean when he’s asking for help; of course when he turns back in the doorway, Dean’s behind the wheel of the Impala, tires squealing into reverse.

He nearly makes it. Castiel stumbles, dropping the bag; he has to flare his wings. The Impala roars forward, headlights sweeping across Castiel’s pupils, billowing his trenchcoat out pale and clumsy behind him, and Castiel doesn’t think. He doesn’t think about appearing human, and who might be watching; he doesn’t even think about Michael.

He steps into Dean’s path. Dean slams on the brakes, too late; the Impala skids. If he were a human, Castiel would be dead.

He isn’t a human. He plants one palm on each side of the Impala’s fender, in between her headlights. Force slams down his arms, through his wings.

The car stops.

When Castiel looks up, Dean’s face behind the windshield is pale, mouth slack. He’s staring at Castiel with round eyes, so round Castiel almost thinks he’s suffered a head trauma; but no, Dean’s gaze tracks Castiel when he straightens up, when he moves to the driver’s side door.

Castiel reaches across Dean to shift the car into neutral. Then he rolls it, one hand on the mirror, back into its parking space.

Dean is still looking at him. Castiel finds he can’t look back. “I’ll watch over you,” he says in a monotone, to the doorframe, and he doesn’t move until Dean climbs out of the car; until he moves inside, obedient, shoulders low with defeat.

This motel's decor is relatively unexceptional. It's floral, a dingy sort of floral; flowers on the wallpaper, on the covers of the beds. It smells like stale cigarette smoke intermingled with chemical air freshener. There's a vase of fake zinnias on the dresser.

Dean sets his duffel bag down and checks inside it, half-hearted; he seems to be thinking about cleaning his weapons. He did that two days ago, spread out on the floor in the empty house, showing Castiel how each gun works, how it comes apart and fits back together again. He looks down at the jumble of metal and his ribs rise and fall and he says, "I gotta take a shower."

Castiel checks the bathroom. There's no window; there's an air vent, but he doesn't think it's big enough for Dean to climb through. He comes back out and gives Dean a nod of permission.

Dean closes the door behind him. Castiel hears the shower spray turn on a minute later, then the sound of a body interrupting it, feet moving around on the floor of the tub.

The movements go still after a while. Castiel tilts his head and considers; the water doesn't seem to be rattling on the plastic curtain quite like it would if the shower were empty.

Several minutes pass.

Doubt creeps in. Is Castiel *sure* Dean couldn't fit through the air vent? He checks outside, and the Impala is still there, but Dean would have realized he couldn't take her. He'd need to hotwire a car. He could be gone by now, long gone — invisible to Castiel's powers and out of his reach.

Castiel goes back inside. He stands beside the bathroom door, and he doesn't hear movement. After a long moment, trying to pitch his voice loud enough to be heard, he says — "Dean?"

There's no answer.

Castiel waits another moment. Two. They stretch out behind him; he doesn't even know where Dean is going in Minnesota. He'll have to track John Winchester instead — there's no hope of intercepting Dean before he reaches him.

He's not sure when his goal changed from making Dean rest to keeping him away from his father, whatever the cost.

Another minute. The shower beats steadily.

Castiel opens the door.

The doorknob is unlocked; that surprises him. If not for the pile of discarded clothes on the floor, it might slam into the far wall.

The room is clouded with steam, but Castiel can see Dean through the translucent windows in the shower curtain. He's standing with his head down, motionless, spray beating on his skull; Castiel can't see his face.

"Dean," he says again, more quietly.

For whatever reason, Dean hears him this time.

He jumps, violently. "Jesus, Cas!" The shower slams off; an instant later, Dean snatches the towel hanging over the curtain rod. When he yanks the curtain open, it's wrapped around his waist, hasty; his face is pale. "What the fuck?"

"I thought you might have climbed out the air vent," Castiel offers, by way of apology. Relief is a warm and giddy sensation. He feels himself smiling, offering up a shared joke; this whiplash in emotions is disorienting. Humans make you feel so much, all the time.

Dean glances at the grate on the wall. "Don't think I'm flexible enough for that," he says. His hands are still clutching the towel, and there's none of the laughter there should be in his voice; his shoulders are hunched. He's trembling.

"Dean?" Castiel asks for a third time, and when Dean doesn't answer, he steps closer. When Dean looks away, Castiel touches his shoulder.

Dean's skin is cold — chilled and damp. He must have been standing in the shower so long it ran out of hot water.

"You're freezing," Castiel says. He reaches for his grace. "Let me —"

Dean flinches away. The movement is violent; he nearly falls. Castiel drops his hand in shock.

Dean still isn't looking at him. He's hunched against the wall, body tight and miserable, and when Castiel starts, "I was only going to —" he says right over him, "What the fuck is this, man?"

Castiel stops. He considers Dean's eyes, glaring hot against the tile,

and asks, “What the fuck is — what?”

With one hand, Dean gestures between them; the other is still clutching his towel. *“This.* You — you come in here and you’re a fucking *angel who’s supposed to save me,* you pick up *cars,* you act like I’m the, the fucking shit for some reason, you — you look at me like — but then you won’t fucking touch me. You won’t fucking *touch* me, Cas, what am I supposed to do with that?”

Castiel is more mystified than ever. “I would be happy to touch you.” He just tried; Dean flinched away from his hand. “I touch you frequently.”

Dean makes a despairing sound in his throat. *“Yeah.* Yeah. You touch me frequently.” He mimics Castiel’s voice, low and raspy, and Castiel feels obscurely offended. “Until you get a *crisis of conscience* again. You act like I’m — like I’m *yours,* do you know how fucking possessive you are? You don’t even want me around my fucking *dad,* but you said it yourself, you’re just gonna fuck off again and leave me with him, so —”

Castiel feels thrown off balance; there’s something hard and desperate in his throat. He feels his back hit the thin wood of the door, his palms flatten against it. He closes his eyes. “I don’t know what you *want,”* he pleads. “Please tell me what you want.”

“Fuck,” says Dean, and there’s a series of ungainly thumps; when Castiel opens his eyes, Dean’s tripping out of the tub, losing his grip on his towel. He nearly falls. He catches himself, instead, with one arm on Castiel’s chest, naked and shivering; “Shit,” he says, and then he kisses Castiel on the mouth.

It does not feel like the last time Castiel kissed Dean.

That experience was warm and soft and wanting — breathless. Castiel remembers Dean’s lips, booze-slick, parting beneath his; he remembers Dean folding into him, yielding, giving and giving in a way that still tugs something low and wonderful in Castiel’s gut. This kiss is not that kiss. This kiss is hard, and terse; even Dean’s lips are cold.

Castiel still wants him.

“I want *you,* you fucking idiot,” Dean says, and then he says, “I want you to not *leave,* don’t you dare fucking leave this time,” and Castiel puts his hands on Dean’s hips and kisses him properly, like he remembers, and if he spills heat while he’s at it into Dean’s shivering

skin, well — Dean either doesn't notice or doesn't mind.

A confusion of things happen after that. Dean is naked, a long beautiful expanse of skin, and Castiel likes that; Dean wants Castiel to touch him, he said he wants Castiel to touch him, so Castiel does. Dean melts in his hands, shuddering and needy and grateful and demanding, but he also wants to touch Castiel too; that's a new discovery for Castiel. Dean's hands yank at his trenchcoat, his tie, and when Castiel pulls back to help him remove them, Dean's eyes track his hands, pupils hungry and enormous.

Then there's Dean's hands on his skin — Dean's mouth. He doesn't give Castiel a chance to shrug off his layers of shirt-jacket-trenchcoat completely, just gets them unbuttoned and burrows inside, breath hot on the heat of Castiel's skin. He tongues Castiel's throat, his clavicle; his hands are working on Castiel's belt.

Then they get it open; they work deft on the fly of Castiel's pants, slip inside, and — *oh.*

Castiel hears his throat make a sound. He thinks his grace stutter-stops; it doesn't shatter any lights this time. It feels like it's pulled inside him, instead — all concentrated down to that one point of attention, of *sensation,* and Castiel has lived a long time, but he's never known anything like this.

Dean speaks against the hinge of his jaw, warm and pleased. "You like that?" He strokes, once, and Castiel feels like he could die. "My hand on your cock?"

Yes; the answer is yes. But there's a more pressing question, and Castiel moves to test it even as he asks, "Do humans experience it too? This — this feeling?"

Dean's gasp when Castiel circles his fingers around his — his cock, that's what he called it — is answer enough. But he speaks anyway, breathless and rasping; *"Shit,* yeah. Cas, that's — you're fucking incredible, you know that? *Fuck.* Like that, here, let's —"

He keeps talking; he doesn't stop talking, and he doesn't stop moving, piercing Castiel with salvos of sensation that nearly make him fall to his knees. But Castiel is nothing if not stubborn — his commanders always said that, he thinks, nonsensically — and he mimics everything Dean does. He strokes Dean's cock and thumbs the head of it and dips his fingers down to circle around Dean's balls, and from the way Dean tips his head back and then lets it drop over Castiel's shoulder and the

string of curse words he lets out, it feels just as good for him as it does for Castiel. They pick up the pace, and Dean kisses him again, and they gasp into each other's mouths, hungry, and eventually Castiel can feel something in Dean coiling, tightening, teetering on the edge — so he chases it, right over.

Dean heaves a great, final shudder, and tips his head back, and warm liquid spills over Castiel's wrist. It's white and pearly and Castiel feels the strange urge to taste it, but then Dean makes a desperate little sound and redoubles his own efforts, eyes still closed, and Castiel's body feels like heaven; like he's made of heaven, the stuff of ecstasy, and Dean's throat is right there and bared, so he kisses it, claiming, open mouth and the slight rasp of teeth, and he spurts his own hot streaks of semen across Dean's bare belly, his hips.

It takes several moments for them each to come down. For their chests to stop heaving; for Dean's eyes to open, wide and wondering, and for Castiel to kiss him, final, insistent and satisfied and thorough, with his hand on Dean's jaw to hold him in place.

His fingers leave a smear of semen behind. Castiel knows the words for these things the same way he knows the words for everything, clinical and disinterested, but Dean might have different ones; "What do you call this?" Castiel asks, and licks it to satisfy his curiosity; it tastes like salt.

Dean's eyes are glassy. "Uh, come," he says, after a beat of silence. "It's called — when you have an orgasm, that's called, you're coming, and the stuff that comes out is just — come."

"Thank you," Castiel tells him. Dean's lips are parted and pink and shining, and Castiel feels the urge to press two fingers against the lower one, so he does, smearing come there too; Dean's eyes flutter closed, and he sways into Castiel's touch.

"You could," he mumbles, lips moving against Castiel's fingers. "You could put your dick in my mouth, too. Sometime. That's called a blow job, or like — blowing you, or sucking you off."

Castiel presses his fingers flat against Dean's tongue, and it curls around them. "Would you like that?"

"Yeah," Dean breathes, half-muffled. "Fuck, yeah."

"Could I do that for you, too?"

A shudder passes through Dean's body, pleasure and anticipation. "Shit. I'm not gonna stop you."

Castiel kisses him. "What else should I know?"

Dean cracks an eye open. "You sure you're like — game for this? I'm not — taking advantage of — a baby in a trenchcoat or something?"

"Dean," says Castiel. "I am several billion years older than you. I am not a 'baby.'"

"Yeah, but you've —" Dean gestures between them. "You've never done this before. You keep saying you're fine with gay people, but last time we kissed you had a big gay crisis and *left.* After that I figured —"

He stops, abruptly. Castiel blinks. He lets his hand drop to Dean's shoulder, but keeps one thumb on his jaw. "What's a 'big gay crisis'?"

Dean shifts uncomfortably. "I mean — you know. You had a whole freak-out. You called it a crisis of conscience. What the hell else was it?"

"I was worried about my vessel," Castiel answers, honest. The question feels like a distraction. "It has become evident to me that I feel deeply opposed to the idea of your possession; it was cowardly not to address my own. But when I attempted to return Jimmy's body to him, he wasn't there." He tilts his head. The term *gay crisis* still seems mystifying to him, but there are things to cobble together: Dean's reaction to the story of the two women at the twine ball. His furtive references to trading sex for money. The way he talks about the doctor with the cowboy boots from the TV show. "Has someone told you a man should not love another man?"

Dean blinks; he sways. "Has someone — Jesus." He shakes his head as if to clear it. "You were worried about your *vessel?"*

"Yes."

"You weren't, like — grossed out."

By Dean? "Of course not."

"And you're sure you're — you're alone in there."

"I'm not sure whether Jimmy is dead," Castiel admits, "or simply —

gone. His 2003 self is alive and well."

"Jesus," says Dean again. He takes a step back, and Castiel's arm falls; Dean runs a hand over his face. "Fuck. So he's fine, until — five years from now, when you nab him."

"Yes." Castiel adds, reluctantly, "I am — not sure, whether this is a recursive timeline or a divergent one. If it's the latter, this Jimmy may live out his days in peace. I — I hope that he does."

Dean's eyes are sharp. "What happens to you, then?"

"I don't know," Castiel admits, honest; as if he has ever planned to still be here in five years. As if he might even expect it.

"I'm — I'm too naked for this." Dean shakes his head. "We should clean up."

Castiel feels a pang. "Yes. Of course."

But something softens in Dean's eyes. He reaches for Castiel's hand; then, when Castiel moves closer, pushes his clothes off his shoulders. "Bet the shower's hot again by now. Come on; I'll help you."

Under the warm spray, Castiel lets Dean apply soap to his body. He could clean himself up in a blink of his grace, but he doesn't say that; he watches as Dean traces fingers over the plane of his belly, tangles them in the hair at the base of his dick.

He returns the favor, too, stroking suds over Dean's hips. He kisses Dean against the tile wall, water running into their mouths, until Dean wraps both legs around his hips, trusting his weight to Castiel entirely, and gasps into his mouth, "There's fucking, too. You asked — what else you should know — you could fuck me. If you like."

Castiel kisses him again. "You need to sleep."

He can practically feel Dean's pang of disappointment, like a prayer. It's mixed up in other things, too — Castiel stopping the car. Castiel's hands, broad on Dean's ass. Castiel carrying him through the room like this; depositing him on the bed.

That much, at least, Castiel can do. Dean is a full grown man, but Castiel is an angel; he reaches to shut off the water with ease. Dean makes a small sound when they step out of the tub, hands tight on Castiel's shoulders, but when they near the bed, he squirms to get free.

“Cas, we’re *wet.* At least let me grab a towel.”

“No,” says Castiel, and dries them both with his grace. He registers Dean’s surprise as he lowers him onto the sheets, then his surge of arousal; Castiel places a hand over his mouth. “Sleep. If you still want to, we can fuck in the morning.”

It pleases him, the sharp intake of breath, the way Dean’s muscles shiver and relax. He’s tempted, briefly, to join him in the bed — to spend the night tangled in Dean’s limbs, Dean’s heartbeat warm against his chest.

No. Dean won’t sleep like that. Castiel draws back, regretful, and Dean squints a baleful look at him. “You suck. You know that?”

“Only if you teach me,” Castiel answers, and smiles himself back to the bathroom to retrieve his clothes.

The night passes quietly. Castiel thinks about all the nights he’s spent like this, watching Dean in the half-light, on the strandline of the highway — where its lighter cargo washes up before floating away again in the morning. He thinks about Dean’s body, naked between the sheets this time, cotton clinging where Castiel’s hands have been. He thinks about how Dean won’t need sleep, if Michael takes him; about how his body might never sleep again.

Around four in the morning, Dean has a nightmare.

It’s been some time since Castiel’s seen this. *I’ll watch over you,* he tells Dean nightly, but there’s seldom a need for it; Dean sleeps soundly most nights, undisturbed. Castiel remembers, though, that first motel room — the very first night. Dean dreaming, before he even knew Castiel was there.

Then, Castiel was able to soothe his bad dreams with his grace. Then, he reached out with his hand to touch anyway, and woke Dean — his very first mistake.

Now, he is too selfish not to repeat it.

He crosses the room and stands by Dean’s bed. For a moment he just watches him — the way his face twitches, the tremors of misery across his mouth. Then he touches Dean’s cheek.

Dean blinks awake slowly.

There's no upheaval of fear this time; no surge of relief, either. Dean's breathing fast and shaky. After several moments, he sits up in bed, fists clutching the edge of the mattress, and he gives Castiel a grateful, hollow look; Castiel touches him again. "You were having a nightmare."

Dean nods. He opens his mouth and closes it again, twice; his eyes are on the floor. They look red but not wet. He glances at Castiel and tries a third time, unsticking a word from his throat, another: "When I — was a kid —"

The syllables come out grudgingly, miserably, like he has to vomit each one up. He closes his eyes and rocks briefly on the edge of the bed. "Can't — talk, sometimes."

"You don't need to talk." Castiel feels a surge of emotion, fierce, behind his sternum; he touches his thumbs to Dean's cheekbones, his ears. "You don't need to —"

But Dean's shaking his head. There are tears on his cheeks now, hot and frustrated. "Got — to —"

Castiel cups his hands around the back of Dean's neck. He touches their foreheads together. "Pray it to me. If you can't speak — try praying it. In your head."

Dean takes in a shuddering breath. It makes Castiel want to kiss him, but that would be a distraction; that wouldn't help Dean speak. And Dean's nodding — Dean's pulling away from Castiel's hold. Castiel drops his hands, letting him go.

He doesn't expect Dean to kneel.

But he does — slipping gracefully off the side of the bed. He drops onto his heels, knees digging into the nubbly carpet. Head bowed, hands folded across his lap.

Castiel feels something indescribable — reckless, protective, the savagery of love.

And Dean's prayer bursts into him. *Cas, he — he doesn't care about kids.*

The words jolt Castiel sideways. It takes him a moment to track them,

to remember what Dean said yesterday, about his urgency to reach John Winchester and join his hunt. “Your father?”

I mean he does, course he does, like he cares about all the people he saves, but he doesn’t, he, he doesn’t —

“It’s all right. You can —”

He didn’t care about us. The words punch out like they’ve been boiling up for decades, and Dean’s crying now for real, chest heaving silently, tears streaming down his face. *He never — that’s when the not-talking thing started, I — my mom died and we went on the road and Sammy was just screaming all the time and I couldn’t talk, not for months.*

Castiel stops trying to interrupt. He knows enough of Dean’s history to picture it: his mother, gone in flames. His father, cold and hard, ripping his sons from their life — from any semblance of normalcy, of healing.

He can picture a four-year-old Dean, belted in the backseat with a crying baby, not speaking. Not *speaking,* not really, even when he started talking again — for miles and years, as the hunt stretched on, as the glimmer of revenge on the horizon faded and their lives became guns and knives; as Dean learned to use his own. He thinks — *if my mission is to save Dean Winchester, I should have gone back further. I should have prevented this.* But he also thinks, *This man that I love emerged from it. There is nothing about him that is past being saved.*

Dean sucks in a deep breath, and it hisses over his teeth. *And I don’t — he knows I care. He knows I care more than he does. That’s why he told me it’s kids. To get me there. I know you think — I’m just some puppet with his hand up my ass — but it’s kids, Cas.*

“I don’t think that.” Castiel touches Dean’s hair, can’t help himself; “I could never think that.”

Dean tilts his face up, suddenly; he turns it into the palm of Castiel’s hand. His eyelashes tickle Castiel’s skin, and he lets out a prayer with no words, a thorned and full and wanting thing.

Castiel touches his thumb to the corner of Dean’s eye, the delicate skin there. He takes a careful breath of his own. “Are you sure?”

Yes, Dean prays, but Castiel knew that already. He knows what it is, to be desperate to worship, to require a reason to fall to your knees.

So he doesn't make Dean ask again. He lets Dean's palms slide up inside his shirt; he helps Dean's fingers dispense with his belt, his fly. He backs Dean up to the bed, skull braced against the soft mattress, and lets Dean beg to serve — beg with his wordless mouth, with his shuddering ribs. With the slick of his tongue, greedy, and Castiel gives him what he asks for. He lets Dean reduce him to nothing, to everything; he gives Dean every last gift in his store.

Afterward, he worships Dean in return, spread out on the mattress and gasping. Dean's hands twist in the sheets; Dean's cock is heavy and gorgeous on Castiel's tongue. When he comes, it tastes of salt, like before, and Castiel moves up the bed to kiss him, testing the taste in Dean's mouth against that in his own; he pulls back and comments, "Better than tacos."

Dean stares at him. "You're insane," he says, and his voice rasps but it doesn't stumble; "you're actually fucking insane," so Castiel explains about molecules.

Dean doesn't seem convinced. He does seem appalled, and suddenly dead-set on finding a way for Castiel to experience food "as God intended"; when Castiel points out that he was made exactly as God intended, Dean hits him with a pillow. "No you weren't," he says. "Pretty sure God didn't make a gay angel to give me blow jobs. Not on purpose, anyway."

Castiel concedes that point. Then he reminds Dean that he has neither gender nor sexuality, not by design; that in all his divine instructions, neither appears. Dean elbows him fondly and says, "Yeah, you're a rebel," but then his face gets more serious and he says, "You know they do in mine, right?"

Castiel does not have access to Dean's divine instructions, though he's guessed the shape of them. But that isn't what Dean's talking about. "You mean your father."

Dean turns in the bed to face him. "I mean my dad, and — my dad's whole world." His eyes are serious, moving across Castiel's face, checking his eyes, the shape of his mouth. "You keep acting surprised about it. Like it shouldn't be any different than a man and a woman. It is, though. You get that, right? In this time, here, it's different."

His gaze is level — intent. Castiel realizes, "You're trying to protect me."

That makes the corner of Dean's mouth quirk. "I guess? I mean, you

can take care of yourself pretty good. I'm not too worried about someone curb-stomping you in an alley or something. But there's —" He stops, rolls onto his back, folding his hands across his belly; his eyes are on the popcorn of the ceiling. "Look. I like dick. And I like sex, and sometimes I've done it for money, sometimes I've been in some — fucked-up situations. But I still *like* it, most of the time. And — most people, they'd — they wouldn't be normal about that. Most people would think I'm — disgusting, or, or ruined, or just — fair game — or else they'd pity me, which is worse. But you're —"

Castiel reaches out. He covers Dean's hands with one of his own; feels Dean shiver when his thumb brushes the soft skin under his ribs. "I think you are perfect."

Dean shivers again. "Yeah. That's what worries me."

"Does he know? Your father?"

There's a long moment of hesitation before Dean answers. "No. I don't think so. Not about — I don't think he knows about any of it." He closes his mouth again, but the look on his face is so tense, so heavy with words unsaid, that Castiel waits; and then Dean says, "If he does, it's just about the — the job part of it. I'm pretty sure."

He says it like it's a relief. Like it would be all right for his father, this man whose orders he trips to obey, to know what he's done for survival; like the world would end if he knew what Dean's done for joy.

"Would he punish you? If he knew?"

Dean grimaces. It takes him a long minute to answer; a truck engine-brakes on the highway.

"No," Dean finally says. "He — he wouldn't punish me. He'd just — look at me like it explains everything I've screwed up all along, and then we'd never talk about it again."

The words cost him. Castiel can tell. He reaches out with a wordless apology, smoothing it into the back of Dean's hand with a thumb.

Dean catches the motion. He presses Castiel's fingers between his. "It's okay," he says, but he's frowning; a moment later, he asks, "Cas? I know you don't wanna hear it, but — we should get moving."

"It's kids. I understand."

Dean shoots him a grateful look; Castiel isn't sure he wants it. He swallows on a decision. "If you would like — I think I can safely transport us, at least part of the way there."

Their destination is the town of Windom, Minnesota.

The strategy is to disguise their teleportation as much as possible. Castiel explains the theory to Dean; the universe operates in patterns. Those may have changed over time, but the flow of cars over highways is not so different from that of ants in the nest, or red blood cells streaming through mammalian veins. Angels — even archangels — are creatures of pattern themselves. So are their sensory capabilities — an angel's grace can stretch far and wide, but they will perceive what they expect to, the everyday rhythms of symmetry, unless something singular happens.

"You are very singular," he adds, with a warning look to Dean, "so we need to be cautious."

Dean rolls his eyes. "Flatterer. Okay, so — this is why you didn't want us going to the twine balls at first?"

"Yes. A singular person in a singular place attracts attention. You were right, though; those places are special, but not because they are singular."

He can't explain better than that, but Dean nods. "Yeah, they're — that kind of roadside stuff, it makes you feel at home in different places. Like, everyone has something weird, you know?" Before Castiel can respond, he adds, "So — it's like, a predator that can only see movement. So as long as it doesn't see you move —"

"Exactly." Castiel spreads out Dean's map on the dashboard. "So — we begin driving. When we reach the predetermined point, I transport us to a very similar point in Wisconsin. Then we drive several more hours to cover our trail."

"Just in case," Dean agrees. "And we're there before dark. Just like if we drove all night."

"Yes."

"All right." Dean slots the key into the ignition; when he turns it, the Impala's engine roars to life. But he pauses with one hand on the

gearshift. “Cas — can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“You’re so worried about — about the angels finding me. Michael. But — you already told me not to say yes. Why — what are you scared of?”

Castiel hesitates.

He doesn’t want to say, *I don’t think you can do it.* He doesn’t want Dean to hear, *You’re too weak.*

“He will do,” he answers carefully, “anything in his power to change your mind. He will do — things that you and I can’t imagine.”

Dean swallows. “He needs me alive, though, right? He wouldn’t kill me, just — just hurt me. I can cope with a little pain.”

Pain might be the least of it. Out loud, Castiel says, “I would prefer you didn’t have to.”

“Right.” Again, Dean swallows; he shifts the Impala into gear. “Well. Let’s do this thing.”

Their plan — Castiel realizes, once they’ve been on the road for an hour or more, as they’re nearing the jump point — failed to account for the weather.

They’re driving into the mouth of a storm. It spreads out before them as they cross the final ridge before Pittsburgh — heavy blue clouds replacing the white ones in the rearview mirror. Even as he glances over at Dean, the first spatterings of rain hit the windshield.

“Shit,” says Dean. “Does that matter?”

Castiel closes his eyes. “If it’s raining here but not in Wisconsin, then — yes.”

“Should’ve checked the radar. Fuck. Maybe it’ll stop soon, and we can still —”

But Castiel is already spreading out his senses. The storm is a big one, stretching out for hours before them — Ohio, Indiana. But not Wisconsin.

“It won’t.” He frowns, sifting — it’s hard to track weather patterns from this far away. “But there’s — it’s sunny in Wisconsin, but there are a few cloudbursts in Minnesota — one’s on the interstate, just east of Blue Earth.”

When he opens his eyes, Dean’s staring at him. “Dude. Do you have a weather radar in your *brain?”*

“I suppose.” Castiel shakes his head, impatient. The rain is already falling, pebbling the windshield; nine hundred miles away, it’s threatening to move off the highway, shifting north. “Tell me what to do, Dean.”

“Blue Earth,” Dean echoes. “Shit, that’s — we’ll be there early. Pastor Jim’s in Blue Earth, I don’t know why my dad didn’t —” He swallows. “Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Let’s do it.”

Castiel nods. He grips the door, for no reason except that the source of Dean’s security might offer him some, as well; “Ready?”

Dean swallows. A blast of rain hits them, and the semi truck ahead of them rocks sideways; *give me fuel give me fire give me that which I desire,* chants Metallica from the speakers. Dean reaches to turn it up.

Then he drops his chin and flexes his fingers on the steering wheel. “Ready.”

Castiel moves them.

He isn’t used to transporting objects in motion; they land a little rough. Dean yells, and jerks the wheel, narrowly avoiding a collision with a minivan changing lanes; the driver flips them off, and the Impala’s rear wheels fishtail in a puddle of standing water. Then she’s righting herself — she’s surging forward — and Dean’s laughing, loud and wild. *Nitro junkie, paint me dead,* the music howls, and Dean says, “Fuck. Fuck! We should do that again.”

Juddery adrenaline is racing down Castiel’s limbs; a laugh catches in his own throat. “So long as Michael doesn’t track us — whatever you want,” he manages, but Dean grins at him, and he finds he’s grinning too.

There’s no sign of an archangel, though. The only thing that splits the sky is ordinary lightning, and before long they’re clear of the storm — passing the exit for Blue Earth. The wet pavement shines in the sun. It’s barely noon, and they’re drawing closer — inexorably closer — to

John Winchester.

Castiel considers suggesting a stop. They have time; Dean might call him a Jewish grandmother if Castiel attempts to feed him again, but that's okay. He keeps hesitating, though. Dean keeps driving. And then they're exiting the highway; they're turning north on Route 71.

Castiel clears his throat. He feels he should say *something;* he doesn't know what. "Dean —"

But the moment he speaks, his words are drowned by the roar of an engine behind them.

Dean's hand jerks on the steering wheel. And an enormous black pickup truck is passing them on the left — lurching back into the lane in front of them, hitting its brakes. A truck Castiel recognizes.

Dean brakes too, with both feet. Their bodies rock forward as the Impala shudders to a stop.

And John Winchester is moving — throwing his door open, not bothering to close it behind him. There's thunder on his face, a pistol in his hand, and he's not moving toward Dean's side of the Impala. He's crossing in front of the hood; he's pointing the gun through the glass. Right between Castiel's eyes.

"Who the fuck," says John, "is that?"

Castiel feels an indescribable calm settle over him.

I could snap you like a twig, he thinks. He would. He will. Let John Winchester try to pull that trigger, and —

But Dean's already jolting his door open, stumbling out of the car, his hands in the air. "Whoa, whoa, hey! Dad. *Dad.* Calm the fuck down, it's — he's —" And he's muscling between his father and the passenger side door, planting both hands on John's chest to shove him backward. Castiel's hand is on the door release; if the gun goes off — "Chill out, okay? He's a friend."

John stumbles on the grass at the side of the road, off-balance from Dean's shove. He drops the gun — nearly falls — stoops to retrieve it. When he looks up, his eyes are glaring, bloodshot and murderous; he closes the distance again, moving into Dean's space, the gun held low but restless in his hands. "You brought a *friend?"*

“He’s a hunter.” Dean shoots Castiel a desperate glance; *play along?* “His name is — Cas. Castiel, uh —”

Castiel opens his door. “Novak.” He moves to stand by Dean’s side.

“Novak, that’s right, yeah, Castiel Novak. He was — helping me on this case out in Jersey, and then you called and I figured, sounds like more backup the better, so —”

John seems to be regaining his composure as Dean talks. He’s swaying on his feet, though, Castiel notices; there’s the stink of whiskey on his breath.

“You were supposed to be resting up, Dean.” He pulls something back into himself, straightens his shoulders. “Not hunting.”

Dean grins. “Yeah, well. That’s why I got Cas here, help with the heavy lifting.”

John’s eyes rake over his body. “Ribs are better?”

“Ninety percent,” Dean lies, easy. “I’m ready to go, sir.”

John nods. “Good. That’s good.” He closes his eyes, and something crumples in his face, a little — crumples and holds. He clicks the gun’s safety into place, slides it into the back of his jeans; when he opens his eyes again, they look watery. “It’s good to see you, Dean.”

Castiel sees uncertainty catch in Dean’s eyes. “Sir?”

“Don’t mind me.” John reaches out to grip his shoulder, smiling strangely. “I’m getting old. Let’s grab a bite to eat, son. Before —”

Dean looks even more at sea. “You didn’t want to — get into the case?”

“I’ll brief you after.” John’s ignoring Castiel entirely now, just staring at his son like he’s drinking in the sight of him, like he’s seeing him for the first time in a century, or the last; Dean’s shoulders are high and tense. “One meal, okay? That’s not too much to ask.”

Dean shoots Castiel a *what the fuck?* look. But his voice is gentle when he says, “Yeah, Dad. Yeah, that sounds good. All right if Cas comes?”

John looks at Castiel. His eyes slide off him again — like Castiel stopped existing the moment John ceased to categorize him as a threat. “Sure.”

They don't go north to Windom. They turn around instead and drive south, back toward the interstate; John pulls in at the first place they see. It's a Dairy Queen. Dean gives Castiel another *What the fuck?* look, then mutters, "He always hated the chain joints. I don't —"

John is already out of his pickup truck, watching them with his hands in his pockets. Dean sucks in a breath and doesn't finish his sentence; instead, he opens his door.

Inside, they get burgers. At John's urging, they order ice cream, too, in some format called a "Blizzard" that the staff seem required to demonstrate they can turn upside down without spilling. Castiel accepts his and feels the cold on his palm.

John barely touches his food. He watches Dean eat, instead, the occasional smile creasing the stillness of his face; eventually, since it seems immaterial, Castiel abandons the pretense of consuming his own meal. He tests small spoonfuls of ice cream against his tongue, instead, working to tease out the flavors.

Dean finishes his burger. He eats a few bites of ice cream, then sets down his spoon, wipes his mouth with a paper napkin. "Dad? You're kind of freaking me out, here."

John laughs. It's a strange sound. "I'm sorry, son. I just keep thinking — there's a racetrack in this town. Car races. Real fun to go to on weekends. If I hadn't taken you boys on the road so young, maybe —"

"That's not any kind of choice, Dad." Dean leans across the table to put one hand on his father's arm. At the same time, he glances at Castiel. "Cas knows, right? Hunting — saving people — it's worth whatever it takes."

Castiel does not think he knows anything of the sort. He opens his mouth, then shuts it again when Dean gives him a warning look.

John's smiling again. "That's what I'd thought you'd say."

Dean stares at him for a moment, then sits back and laughs, a little forced. "You sure I shouldn't be busting out the silver and holy water?"

John laughs, too. He pulls a knife from his pocket and slices it, carelessly, across his arm; blood drips onto the tabletop. Next, he

produces a flask, offering it to Dean to inspect. When Dean nods, he splashes its contents on the wound. “Satisfied?”

“I guess.” Dean looks down at his Blizzard. “I mean, it’s just — you haven’t taken me out for ice cream in — ever.”

“I know.” John’s watching the drip of the blood and water onto the sticky formica. “Believe me, son. I know.”

Dean swallows. He asks, in a lower voice: “It’s bad, huh?”

John looks up sharply. “What’s bad?”

“The case.” Dean’s eyes are on his father’s, searching, and Castiel thinks about what he said, or prayed, a few impossible hours ago: *He doesn’t care about kids. He didn’t care about us.* “It’s kids, right? That’s why you’re all — you know.”

John’s shoulders go stiff. Castiel thinks for a moment he’s about to cry; then he says, instead, gruff, “Eat your ice cream, Dean.”

Dean hesitates.

“That’s an order.”

So Dean eats, mechanical.

Castiel doesn’t. He stares at John Winchester instead, unblinking. Something’s rattled him. Castiel can’t read him, though; can’t bring himself to focus, to truly want to know what’s in John’s heart. Not when Dean is struggling to swallow beside him. Not when Dean’s battling down nausea and worry and resentment and pure, surging fear.

Still he keeps eating. Still John watches. He watches like he likes what he’s seeing, and Castiel can’t tell what kind of monster he is — the kind who truly believes his son is happy, performing this charade? Or the kind that sees his obedience and doesn’t care?

Dean might know. He’ll still put on this pantomime, though. His father has taken him out for ice cream, and Dean will eat it on command.

He nearly chokes on a bite. Castiel reaches out to lay a hand on his thigh, under the table, and says, quietly, “That’s enough.”

He keeps his eyes on John’s. Watches the challenge register there,

then the anger; Dean lowers his spoon.

Give me a reason, Castiel thinks. He can picture it — slamming his palm into John Winchester's chest. Making him hurt. Making him scream.

But John just turns away — knocking his chair back as he rises, so the legs bang on the floor. His face is tight and hard. "You're right. We should get to it."

At the cars, John doesn't look at them. "Follow me. Don't stop, whatever you see."

The Dean Castiel knows would protest — would demand to know what they're walking into. But the Dean beside him is quiet and shocky, eyes round, and he doesn't speak. His gaze seeks out Castiel's, a little slowly, and once they're inside the Impala he manages, "Cas, I need — I need something to shove me back in my own skin, here."

Castiel glances over at the pickup truck. John is doing something furtive, adjusting weaponry, focused; his eyes aren't on them.

So Castiel leans across the seat and kisses Dean. He wraps his wings around him, tight, and tastes the sweet lingering flavor of ice cream on his tongue; he wills phantom feathers to press confidence into Dean's shoulderblades, confidence and calm. *You are whole,* he thinks. *You are yourself. You are yours, not your father's. If you choose, you are mine.*

"Thanks," Dean says, shaky, when he pulls back. "I — thanks." He still looks washed out, but he doesn't look as dazed. "Do you think — what the fuck do you think it could be? The case?"

Castiel doesn't know. He has never concerned himself with the realms of humans and their monsters; he explains that to Dean with regret. At the truck, John finishes with his work. He points a sharp nod at Dean, and Dean starts the Impala's engine.

"He said 'whatever we see,'" Dean adds. "Do you think — do you think something's fucked up with the whole *town?"*

It quickly becomes obvious that that's exactly what John means.

The road is eerily quiet. No other cars pass them as they drive north

— not for a while. Then there's one in a ditch.

Castiel peers inside as they pass. There's a man laying flat across the dashboard, blood pooled around his head. The woman in the driver's seat has her hands in the air, as if a moment ago they were holding the wheel. Her eyes are wide and glassy, unmoving. She seems caught in slow motion, falling imperceptibly forward — an endless crash.

"Holy shit," Dean breathes.

There are more wrecked cars. There are people crumpled on sidewalks, as if they fell unconscious in the middle of putting letters in the mailbox, or unloading groceries from minivans. Some seem to lie where they've fallen; others are falling still. Dean turns his head at a child riding a bike — a child who *was* riding a bike. He's halfway through spilling off it, suspended in midair. One skinny knee juts toward the sidewalk, an instant from pain. His face shows fear.

"I don't like this." A discordant hum is spreading through Castiel's grace. It feels awful, muddy and cloying. It makes him feel like he can't think.

"Yeah, you'd be pretty fucked up if you did." Dean's head swivels again — a teenage boy on the front steps of a porch, playing with a knife. Or he was. He must have caught it in his hand wrong, blade-first; blood is seeping there, but slowly. On his face, though —

Dean swears. "Is he crying?"

Castiel looks — there's salt crusted to the boy's cheeks. "In a way." It might be accumulating, but slowly, like minerals in a cave. "Dean, I *don't like this."*

"Me either, buddy." But Dean's driving still, hands steady on the wheel. "My dad *said* it would be hairy, though. We gotta trust him."

Castiel closes his mouth.

There's a girl, eleven or twelve, standing unmoving on the front porch of a house, hand stretched toward the knob. Another, carrying a boy; her little brother, maybe — back bent from his weight, shoulderblades standing out like wings. There's a boy with his shirt off, on his knees in a lawn by a sprinkler. He has both hands clapped over his ears, face screwed up tight with pain.

All of their faces are rimed in salt. Castiel thinks of Lot's wife. He

thinks, *We should not be in this place.*

“It’s gotta be a curse or something, right?” Dean’s saying. “Witch business?”

“I don’t know. Dean — turn around.” He’s desperate for it, suddenly, can’t explain; anxiety is a snake in his belly, coiling at its walls. “We need to turn around.”

“I’m not gonna — look, he’s turning in.” And John is, pulling up the driveway to an unremarkable single-story house. The curtains are drawn, and there’s no light coming from inside. It looks abandoned.

Dean parks behind his father’s truck. “Come on.”

Castiel can’t do anything but follow.

John is waiting for them on the porch. He’s got the front door ajar; “Come on, come on.” His gestures are urgent, voice soft, eyes darting up and down the street. “It’s a safe house. Get inside.”

“Dad,” starts Dean, “what —”

“I’ll explain inside. Kinda surprised *he* made it,” he adds, like an afterthought, and Castiel only realizes as he passes through the door in Dean’s wake that John is talking about him.

He might wheel around and ask why. He might demand answers — from the way Dean jolts, he suspects Dean would do the same. Did John think Castiel would fall asleep like the others — fade and flicker into a salt-lined shell? Did he risk that, uncaring, without a word?

Why would he think the same wouldn’t happen to him — to Dean?

From the look on Dean’s face, he’s angrier than Castiel is. He sucks in a deep breath as John shuts the door — turning to unleash it in words.

He never makes it. Halfway, he stops; his eyes catch.

There’s someone else in the house.

It’s a boy. Thirteen, Castiel thinks; he couldn’t be much older. He’s got dark blonde hair that spikes around his face, and hollow eyes, and he’s not frozen. He’s sitting in an armchair as if it could be a throne.

The dull hum in Castiel’s grace worsens. The boy stands up.

“John,” he says, “thank you,” and his voice is mountains and oceans. His voice is the crushing wheel in Castiel’s head, the snake in his stomach, the pain splintering over his bones. Castiel knows that voice.

“Michael,” he breathes, before everything goes dark.

It flickers back a moment later. Castiel’s on his knees, suddenly, with no memory of how he got there. There’s blood running down his face from his nose, oozing over his lip, and Michael’s standing over him — there’s a golden blade in his hand.

It pricks the skin under Castiel’s jaw when Michael uses it to turn his chin up. “You’ve been quite the pest, you know. More than I would have believed.”

Where is Dean? Castiel’s ears are ringing. He can see John, face heavy, hands braced to the door — like he’s guarding it, or like he’s trying to press himself through. “The town,” he manages, grasping for meaning, for the first thing he can understand. “It’s — you’re dampening it. Slowing it down so much other angels won’t notice it. Right?”

“A crude device, but effective.” The point of the blade seems to dig harder under Castiel’s chin; Michael’s watching him, his face still. “Like you, it seems. When my counterpart sent you here in an effort to frustrate my designs, I thought he’d gone senile. I suppose he knew something, after all.”

His counterpart — the Michael from Castiel’s time? So he *did* send Castiel here, and with the purpose of — of —

Castiel scrapes for his splintering thoughts. Everything hurts; his head is buzzing. He thinks he sees movement, off in the corner — a pair of legs, stirring. They’re clad in jeans, leading to a pair of scuffed boots — Dean must have tried something. Michael must have thrown him clear.

Castiel wants to reach out his senses, his grace — check every inch of Dean. Make sure he’s all right. But whatever Michael’s doing, it makes him seasick. It makes his awareness splinter into drunken fractals the moment he expands it outside of himself. He can’t tell — if Dean’s hurt, if Dean’s frightened, if Dean’s even himself at all.

There’s triumph in Michael’s face. He’s looking at Castiel like he enjoys seeing him struggle; like he loves to watch him reach, and fall

short.

What would Dean say? Castiel spits, “Fuck you.”

Michael smiles thinly.

But the legs are stirring again — with intent this time. Dean’s torso falls sideways into view, a small *thump;* there’s glass in his hair, drywall dust on his leather coat.

His pistol is in his hand.

John can’t see him; he’s hidden behind the armchair. But Michael must sense Castiel’s wave of relief, or Dean’s motion, or hear the sound of a thumb on a hammer; he turns. His body looks momentarily awkward, pivoting — the gawky teenage form that it is.

“What he said,” says Dean, and fires.

The bullet strikes Michael right between the eyes.

Several things happen at the same time.

John shouts in horror, lurching forward. Dean is grabbing onto the back of the armchair to lever himself up, favoring his right leg. Castiel sags without the support of the blade under his chin — he’s too weak for balance.

Michael frowns. He holds out a hand, stopping John Winchester where he stands. He raises the other and looks down at it, considering; then he coughs, once, and spits a bloody bullet into the palm of his hand.

The wound in his forehead gapes. He raises his eyes to Dean’s, slow, unearthly; there’s blood on his mouth. Then he laughs. “Don’t you know who I am?”

Dean’s face looks white, terrified, but his jaw is set. “Yeah. You’re the asshole archangel who wants to jump my bones. Cas told me about you. What I can’t figure, though — is how the hell you made a puppet out of my dad.”

Michael glances over his shoulder. “John? Oh, he’s acting of his own free will. I misspoke, Dean, I’m sorry. I meant, don’t you know who I’m *in?”*

There are tears on John’s face now, and not slow ones; his shoulders shake with a choked-down sob. And the answer is swimming toward

Castiel's consciousness. *Blood,* his own voice reminds him. *Shared blood. Strong vessels, they — they run in families.*

"I'm your brother," Michael says.

Chapter End Notes

(More detailed content warning: in addition to general terrible parenting and the legacy thereof, this chapter contains an instance of forced eating, a temporary relapse into emotional mutism, and some discussion of homophobia. If you want more info on any of these, let me know.)

ICYMI: check out this gorgeous art of Cas and a twine ball from last chapter!

And here's my own chaotic tumblr post for this fic.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“No.”

Dean isn’t talking to Michael. He isn’t looking at Michael. He’s standing straight now, injured leg forgotten; his eyes are squarely fixed on his father, across the room.

Castiel struggles to keep his vision from clouding with gold-edged spots. John looks broken — tormented. “Dean.”

“No. You do not have — *another fucking family.* Tell me he’s lying, Dad.”

It’s a demand — and a promise. *Tell me, and I’ll believe you. Tell me. I’ll let you order my world one more time.*

“His name is Adam,” John says, softer than anything, and Dean screams a laugh and walks away to the wall.

Castiel’s heart breaks. Castiel’s heart keeps breaking and breaking for this man.

In the center of it all, Michael is still and quiet — watching. John squares his shoulders. “I didn’t know,” he says, stronger now. “Until last year. I didn’t know. His mother called me, and I — I drove all night to get here, I —”

“You drove all night.” Dean runs a hand over his face. “You drove all night. Great. Fucking great. I — what, Sam leaves, and voila, you’ve got a new youngest son?”

“Dean. He’s your blood.” John’s face creases in a helpless smile. “He likes — baseball, and biology class. He’s a good kid. Wants to be a doctor someday.”

It doesn’t matter how muddled Castiel’s senses are; he can *feel* the surge of Dean’s misery, the prick of tears at the corners of Dean’s eyes, before he presses his fingers there to quell them. “You don’t think *I* — fuck. Okay. Fuck. You take him to car races, huh? You take him for ice cream.”

“I got a chance, Dean,” John pleads, low and fervent. “A chance to get it right.”

Dean lowers his hand. Even through the haze of nausea, Castiel can see the hatred flash in his eyes.

Then something settles in him — some understanding, dropping into place. “He’s a bargaining chip. Right?” His spine is straight, his voice hard. “Adam. Michael nabbed him, and then he gave you a choice.”

Michael hasn’t moved from the center of the room. His expression is one of polite boredom; like the sun they orbit around, he stands listening, testing the point of his blade against his thumb. At Dean’s words, though, he looks up — a flash of interest in the coldness of his eyes.

John’s crying freely. He nods his head.

“I want to hear you say it,” Dean whispers, low and vicious.

John sways. But he’s nodding, again; his eyes are on the floor. “Michael wants you for a vessel. He doesn’t want Adam.”

“Great. I’m the most popular girl at the prom.”

“If you say yes, he’ll — he’ll give Adam back. Unharmed.”

Dean glances at Michael, assessing; with a faint smile, Michael waves his hand, and the bullet wound disappears.

“What then?” Dean demands. “What’re you gonna do with me?”

“For now?” Michael shrugs. “Not much. Dispense with the — meddlers.” He glances at Castiel. “Set things on their proper path again. And then I’ll wipe your memory, I imagine; I’ll leave you for a time.”

“For a time,” Dean repeats. “What after that?”

Again, that thin-lipped smile. “Divine destiny.”

“Sounds fun,” Dean deadpans. “Okay. If you’re fucking off anyway, what do you need me for? Ditch the kid, squeegee our brains, see you later. Never, preferably. Why do I gotta say yes?”

The expression on Michael’s face seems to have become rather fixed. “Recent — events,” he says, “have demonstrated the prudence of

marking my claim."

"Marking?" Dean repeats. "What are you, a dog? Gonna lift your leg and pee on me?"

Its stillness, even on a thirteen-year-old's face, makes Michael's smile look nasty. "I could simply imprison you until the time that I need you. I am magnanimous. I am offering you — oh, five years of freedom. Give or take."

"No," Dean fires back.

"No?"

"Nice try." His eyes are gleaming, miserable and triumphant. "Cas told me what happens to an archangel vessel once they're done with 'em. So — no. Five years as a shivering shell, that ain't much of an offer."

"Oh. You're speaking of the watchman at the factory. I assure you, I do not usually leave my vessels in such condition; that was due to the interference of — others. Any further life I grant you — it will be a full life, in possession of all your faculties."

Dean points at Michael's chest. "And him?"

Michael looks down. "Adam? Say yes, and the same will go for him. He'll remember none of this. Say no, and — well. I might leave him ruined. I might just keep him."

Castiel hates him. Michael is his commanding officer, and Castiel hates him; that one thought gasps for air through the fog in his brain. The blade is still in Michael's hand, held loosely by his side. Only an archangel can kill another archangel, that's how the stories go, but maybe — maybe, if Castiel had his blade —

"Dean," John whispers. "Please."

Dean turns sharply to him, and there are tears glittering hard in his eyes. "That a fucking order?"

John doesn't answer.

And the tears are slipping onto Dean's cheeks now; he shifts his grip on his useless gun. "Cas goes free."

Michael's chin jerks. "What?"

“Cas goes free. That’s my condition.” Dean swallows, and Castiel hears a roar in his ears that isn’t from Michael’s grip on his grace; that’s from the sound of his world tumbling into dust. “You don’t hurt him. You send him back to his own time. You wipe his memory of — of all this. And I’ll say yes.”

“No,” Castiel croaks.

Dean’s eyes slip to him. *I’m sorry,* they say. *I’m so, so sorry, Cas.*

Michael is laughing. He isn’t looking back at Castiel; his blade is almost within reach. “Are you serious? The one thing that’s been a thorn in my side — that’s been keeping you from me — and it’s the weapon I need to turn you. That is *poetic.”*

“Whatever.” Dean lifts his chin. “Will you do it?”

“Yes,” Michael breathes. “Yes. I accept your terms.”

Castiel makes his move.

It’s a floundering one. His limbs don’t work right; when he surges forward, he nearly falls flat on his face. It feels as though he’s fighting through a thousand invisible threads, tying him to stillness — but he struggles on. And there’s Michael’s hand, the blade — John shouts, “No!”

Castiel has it. He’s plunging it into Michael’s back — just missing the spine.

There’s a moment when he thinks it’s worked.

Michael staggers — his eyes flare white. The wound flares, too, a beam of light that sears Castiel’s vision; he ducks. “Cover your eyes!” he shouts to the humans, to Dean, but then —

The light is fading. And there’s a hand around Castiel’s throat — flinging him into the wall.

“Castiel.” Fingers tighten around his trachea, and he doesn’t need air, doesn’t need it, but Michael is strangling him all the same. “Your name will be sung alongside Lucifer’s. Heaven’s great traitors.”

Dean’s voice. “Cas!”

I had orders, Castiel thinks. *Save Dean Winchester. I had orders* — but this stopped being about orders a long time ago.

“I’ve already been to see your counterpart in my army.” The touch of a blade on his throat. “Did you feel it, when he died?”

No. Castiel shakes his head, keeps on shaking it despite the pressure of metal against his skin; if he’d been killed in this time, wouldn’t he —

“I had hoped that the paradox would destroy you.” Michael nicks his skin, deliberate, enough for some grace to seep out; Castiel feels nauseous, closes his eyes. “But perhaps this is a blessing — this time, I can kill you slow.”

“I’ll never say yes to you. I’ll never — if you hurt Cas —”

For a moment, the pressure on Castiel’s throat lessens. When he opens his eyes, he glimpses Dean, wrestling with Michael’s arms — his father, behind him, trying to pull him back. “We had a *deal* —”

“You will *obey,”* Michael snarls, lashing out.

Both Winchesters go flying. Castiel sees Dean hit the wall, hard, and slump out of sight.

“Dean,” he croaks, trying to push himself upright, but Michael’s hands are back. They’re reaching — not for Castiel’s throat, not into physical space at all, but somewhere beyond. They’re slipping through dimensions. They’re grasping Castiel’s wings.

Then they *pull.*

Castiel screams.

It’s a pain like he’s never known before. It’s a pain that’s deeper than his body, deeper than his grace. It’s the pain of coming apart, unraveling — *like the twine ball,* he thinks, nonsensical. *Like if every fiber in every strand all pulled apart — all at once.*

Then Michael pulls harder, and Castiel has no room left for thought — only pain.

He can feel his body convulsing. His wings manifesting, struggling, spreadeagled against the wall. Something hot and horrible burbles inside him, liquefying, and there’s black tar spilling out of his mouth, down his chin. The vitrified remnants of *Castiel,* of his very self — Michael’s burning him to glass.

It’s a horrible way to die. The howling echoes of his centuries, his

millennia, sear through him. Screaming birds over prehistoric seas. A woman in a room with a needle. The speech of the kings of Babylon. *Save Dean Winchester,* and Dean's voice, always Dean's — the shots of Dean's gun, the bullets piercing Castiel's chest.

Is this how it would feel, if he were human in that moment? *It's a horrible way to die.* Are they not all horrible?

He prays that Dean is unconscious. That Dean, at least, cannot witness this. He blinks for his vision, blackness clouding his eyes.

And over Michael's shoulder — a flare of light, blue-white.

It's Dean.

It isn't Dean. His face is still and solemn. His eyes are shining with grace.

Michael — the other Michael, the one from Castiel's time, the one whose presence he's felt, at that factory, in the words that brought him here — *Save Dean Winchester* — puts a hand on Adam's shoulder. He yanks him around.

And the Michael in Adam's body staggers. He's weaker — Castiel sees that, through clouded eyes. It might be the wound in his back. It might just be that he's younger — however infinitesimally, on the scale of an archangel's life.

It might be that he doesn't have his Sword.

Dean's body is alight with power. The wings he casts against the walls carry claps of thunder with them. They bloom from his shoulders, enormous — they're wider than the house. They blot out the sky.

There's a sneer on Michael's — Adam's — face. Fury, but fear also. "I guess you got there first."

The voice that used to be Dean's resonates across a thousand dimensions — rings the stars. "Release the angel Castiel."

Michael turns.

Castiel sees what's about to happen too late. But then, so does Dean — Michael.

The lance that materializes across Adam's shoulders is a familiar one. Castiel's seen it once before — more often, he's looked upon the

paintings that depict it. Michael casting down Lucifer. Michael slaying the dragon.

Adam's fists grasp it. The runework flares.

And the blade pierces Castiel's body, just below the ribs.

Immediately, the pain redoubles.

Castiel can feel the lance drag back out of him. It doesn't matter, though — it's nothing, not beside the pain. It's attacking him, the fabric of him, just like before — only no hands are grasping him now. Tar boils from his mouth, from his nose — from the wound in his belly.

He's dying. He lies there crumpled on the floor — when did he fall to the floor? As if through a veil, he can see John Winchester, unconscious against the opposite wall. His dimming eyes can barely track the combat unfolding across the room.

It's brutal — uncompromising. Two Michaels, and they know each other well — too well. They strike; they block.

One has his lance. It reaches, flickers, probes for an opening — darting at Dean's ribs.

The other has his Sword.

Save Dean Winchester. The words of Castiel's commander. But Dean thought this is what he meant, all along — *Castiel, please be a dear and save me some Dean Winchester!* If he was right, it's over. If he was right, he's given his consent, and he's gone.

Maybe it's just the delirium setting in — the unraveling of his own thoughts. But Castiel thinks he was wrong.

His eyes are almost too dim to see it happen. The moment Dean's Michael sidesteps a blow; the way he lets Adam's stumble close. His hands on the lance, then, wresting it sharply — up, free.

From there, the battle is one-sided.

But Castiel doesn't want to die yet. He doesn't want to miss it — he needs to see the end. He needs Dean to survive, in the hands of someone who might — maybe — care for him. In the hands of

someone who sent Castiel through time on this mission, who pressed on him that word — to *save.*

Adam's feet stumble. He staggers back, tripping over the edge of a rug; the butt of the lance knocks him to the floor.

Hatred and defeat shine up out of his face. "It doesn't matter. That *vessel* you care so much about — I killed his pet angel. I've already broken him. There's no sparing him now."

For an instant, the grief and anger shining out of Dean's face make it look like his own.

He surges forward — the lance point to Adam's throat. A slow death, like Castiel's. A horrible one.

And faster than the eye can see, he buries the lance in the floor.

There's a blade in his hand, spinning — shining and gold. And he's sinking it, strong and true, right into Adam's heart.

Castiel's senses lose some of their grip after that.

There's the flash of lightning — the flare of grace. Screaming. The house shaking. Wings burned high on the walls.

There's Dean standing before him, face heartsick. The lance is in his hands again. Braced in two fists.

And it's breaking — runes flaring. Abruptly, the pain ebbs.

So does the blackness. Castiel can feel his limbs again. He touches his mouth, and his fingers come away clean.

"I'm sorry," says Michael. "I'll leave you now," says Michael. "I only wish —"

Castiel struggles to sit up. "Wait."

The Michael in Dean's body is already half turned away. He glances back, face expressionless, alien; "Yes?"

"You sent me here." Castiel braces his hands on the wall, pushing

himself to his feet. “Not — not God, or — just you.”

“God doesn’t care.”

The words are toneless. They should shake Castiel more than they do. “Okay, but — you do, and you sent me here. Why?”

When Michael looks down, it hollows Dean’s cheekbones with shadow. “Your directive was clear.”

“My directive?” Castiel repeats, incredulous. “My directive was not — *clear*. My directive — I had no briefing. No warning. You —”

Is that a small smile on Dean’s lips? “You fulfilled it, better than I could have hoped.”

Save Dean Winchester. “You’re releasing him?”

“Yes.”

“So what now? What — are you just going to come back in five years, like the other one said? Why do all this in the first place?”

Michael answers his questions in order. “Now, I intend to take command in Heaven. In five years — I hope that my actions mean the events of five years from now will never come to pass. In the first place —”

He stops.

Castiel waits.

“In the first place,” Michael says, “I knew it was dangerous to grow too close to humans. To look in on them; to know them at all.”

“You mean your vessels.”

“Yes. And I did it anyway.” He looks away again. “It is one thing — to carry one’s family tragedy to its natural end. It is another to inflict it on someone else.”

He’s about to go. Castiel doesn’t understand. “Wait,” he pleads again, hardly believing himself, his own protest; “just — what about me?”

“What about you?”

“What now — for me?”

“I imagine you’ll do whatever you wish to. That *is* why I chose you for this mission. Your memories may be hazy, Castiel — but you have a reputation.”

Castiel blinks. He blinks again. “My vessel, though. Is it —”

“Ah.” Michael’s smile creases Dean’s face. “Yes. Your vessel is yours, and yours alone. We created it from the template you had selected, when we sent you here. A difficult trick, but —” He sees the question on Castiel’s face at the word *we.* “I had a little help from a trickster.”

Castiel has more questions. About the fate of Jimmy Novak, about the future they left behind. About *this* future, because it must have changed now, and about how Michael knew — what Michael did —

But Michael is lifting Dean’s chin. He’s spreading his arms, face tipped up to the ceiling — white light is building within him. And it’s streaming out, up, an immense column — piercing the roof of the house. Piercing the sky beyond it. Rising and rising, until at last it’s gone — at last, Dean’s body crumples to the floor.

Castiel lurches forward — falls to his knees. *“Dean,”* he says, touching his shoulders, but Dean is already rolling over, reaching out a blind hand for Castiel.

He coughs once, face tightening with pain. “Well, that sucked,” he says, and opens his eyes.

The relief Castiel feels — relief, and joy — knocks him back on his heels. He sits abruptly, and his throat makes an incredulous laugh.

Dean rolls into a sitting position. His face is worried, suddenly, eyes searching over Castiel’s body — the rent in his shirt. Dean reaches his hand out to touch it, the warm skin underneath.

Castiel catches his hand — presses it to his heart. “I’m all right,” he promises.

Dean’s chin trembles. “You fucking better be. If you — don’t know what I —”

He stops talking when Castiel pulls him into an embrace.

It’s a clumsy one. There are knees in the way, both of them on the

floor, but Dean melts into it. His hands come up to cling to Castiel's shoulders. He buries his face in Castiel's neck. "I thought you were *dead,"* he murmurs into Castiel's skin, and Castiel holds him tighter — doesn't let go.

Across the room, John Winchester is waking up.

Castiel hasn't spared much thought for anyone but Dean since the battle began. He remembers now, as John scrambles across the floor, dirties his knees with the ash of Michael's wings —

John bends over Adam's body. His shoulders are shaking, fingers touching his face.

Adam coughs.

And Castiel remembers — a story he'd heard, long ago. That archangel blades are built differently. To kill the angel, and leave the vessel unharmed.

Apparently Michael insisted. That's what Uriel said, and raised his eyebrows, like it was a scandalous thing — to be spoken about only in the lowest of murmurs, in the darkest corners of Heaven.

Adam's sitting up, his eyes round and confused. "Dad?"

John pulls him against his chest.

His palm is enormous against the side of Adam's skull. He kisses Adam's hair, holding him tight, and when he lifts his eyes to Dean and Castiel they're bloodshot. He points at Castiel with the hand still holding his son. "He's one of them."

Dean stiffens. He pulls away from Castiel, turning his head, and Castiel lets him go reluctantly. "Dad, it's not — angels, they —"

He stops short. He darts a glance at Castiel, pleading, and he doesn't need to pray; Castiel understands.

He doesn't move from the floor. He doesn't move at all; he doesn't need to tower over John Winchester.

"*You* are one of them," he says softly. "The first of them. Those who would teach your son to be used and discarded."

It feels, for a moment, like every molecule of air in the room belongs to him.

John looks like a man grasping for anger — a retort. He doesn't find one. Adam is stirring, pulling back in his arms — lifting his face.

Neither of them is looking at Dean, so Castiel does. Dean looks sick — grateful, and sick.

Before anyone can speak, though, there are steps from down the corridor. And a woman's voice, sleep-muzzy and confused: "John?"

"Mom!"

Adam pulls free of his father's embrace. He trips toward the doorway, nearly falling. The woman who emerges there looks momentarily taken aback; then she folds him into a tight hug.

She must have been here all along, under Michael's spell. She's wearing soft cotton in a uniform color, what Dean has told Castiel are called scrubs; she looks confused. "I just — lay down for a nap —"

"It's okay, Mom," says Adam. "It was —"

Dean reaches out to touch Castiel's knee. In an undertone, he says, "We should go."

Castiel nods his consent. They rise quietly, moving toward the door; Castiel sees John Winchester's eyes track them. He doesn't try to stop them, though. Just watches as Dean's hand turns the knob — as Dean stands there, briefly, taking one last look at the family that isn't his, before he follows Castiel out and closes the door behind them.

Out on the street, there are people waking up. Parents rushing out of homes to find their children. Some of them look distressed; most of them just look confused. Castiel watches them brush it off, speak to each other, smile.

Dean starts the Impala's engine without speaking. They drive without speaking, north out of town — they don't return the way they came. Dean points the Impala at open road and accelerates, and slowly they pass the last vestiges of Michael's curse — the people backing their cars out of ditches, calling tow trucks, bandaging wounds.

"That's gonna be hard," Dean says, quietly. "They're gonna — it'll take a long time to make sense of what happened to them. Probably most of them never will."

"Yes," Castiel agrees.

They keep driving. Through towns that seem normal and bustling; past people who aren't wiping salt from their eyes. They drive for an hour, and then Dean pulls into a motel parking lot in Redwood Falls.

Castiel follows him into the office. Dean drums a credit card that doesn't have his name on it on the counter. "We need a room. Whatever you've got."

The man behind the desk has thin hair combed over a large bald spot. He glances between them. "For the hour, or —?"

Dean snaps, "For the fucking night."

The man raises his eyebrows. But he complies, working slowly. He runs the card, and it clears; he hands them a single large, brass key.

Castiel follows Dean back to the car. He sits in the passenger seat while Dean moves it down to the end of the row of rooms, parks it again; he helps Dean collect his duffel bag from the trunk.

Inside the room, Dean lets the door close behind them. His shoulders shake, once; then he drops his bag.

Castiel says, "Dean?"

And Dean turns, tears streaking his face. "I thought you were *dead."*

"I'm not," Castiel starts to say, but his response is cut off when Dean takes two quick steps and pushes him into the wall and kisses him.

It's a desperate kiss, needy and insistent, and Castiel pulls Dean close and does his best to keep up. Dean's fighting for space again, though, for inches between them, and when Castiel lets him go he brings his hands up, urgent, to unbutton Castiel's shirt. He doesn't stop kissing him, not while he pulls the tie free, the shirt wide open — but then he does, and rests his forehead against Castiel's to stare down at his unmarked skin.

His thumb finds the place where the lance wound was and runs over it, again and again. "I thought you were dead," he says, again, and, "what he was doing to you —"

Castiel catches his hand. He raises it to his mouth and kisses it, on the knuckles, along the veins. "That's why you said yes?"

Dean nods, throat bobbing. "He said he'd try to save you. He didn't

even say he could, not for sure. I just —"

Castiel finds his other hand, kisses it too. "Were you awake? When he was in you?"

"Most of it," Dean nods. "I remember when Michael stabbed you. I remember —" His voice turns almost shy. "I remember what he said about your vessel."

"My vessel," Castiel repeats. "I suppose you could call it my body. I'm glad it is entirely mine, so that I can be entirely yours."

Dean shivers. His pupils are wide. "Cas, you can't just — say shit like that."

"I find that I can." Castiel kisses him again. "It might be awkward if I ever run into Jimmy Novak, though."

That makes Dean smile; a hint of a laugh tugs at the corner of his mouth. "Don't worry. You're always awkward."

Castiel laughs. "Thank you."

They kiss for a while, more languid than urgent, there against the wall. Dean keeps running his hand over Castiel's stomach, soothing, though Castiel knows he's also soothing himself. Eventually, Dean pulls them apart for long enough to ask, lips puffy, "Can we get clean? Together, maybe?"

Castiel assents. He follows Dean into the bathroom, letting him tug him by their intertwined fingers; he helps Dean undress. Under the spray of the shower, they keep kissing. When Castiel points out that he doesn't need soap or shampoo, Dean answers, "Shut up, it's — romantic," and smooths suds over Castiel's naked body. When he moves on to the shampoo, massaging it into Castiel's scalp, Castiel finds that the touch makes his whole body tingle pleasantly; he wants to arch into it, to butt his head into Dean's hands like a cat.

When Dean tries to move him back under the showerhead, though, Castiel doesn't let him. He sinks to his knees instead, letting the spray beat the top of his skull, and takes Dean's half-hard dick in his mouth. He blows him like that, with water running down his face, over his lips, and guides Dean's hands to his hair when he tries to flatten them against the tile. Dean is kneading Castiel's scalp in time with his

strokes by the time he comes, soft and gasping, and Castiel swallows it down.

Afterward, Castiel surges back up to kiss him, letting Dean taste himself in Castiel's mouth, using his chest to press him against the tiles. He's hard himself, can feel his dick pressing heavy against Dean's hip, and Dean gasps into his mouth, "Want you to fuck me, Cas. Want you to fuck me so bad —"

"This first," Castiel answers, and Dean looks confused for a moment before Castiel reaches for the shampoo.

It turns Dean to putty in his hands. He smooths his thumbs in circles over Dean's scalp, and Dean melts against him; Castiel spreads soap down the small of his back, the curves of his ass, his thighs. He thinks about fucking Dean, about spreading those thighs and thrusting between them, and he *wants* it — but Dean's eyelids are drooping. Dean's sighing, half-conscious, into his touch.

When Castiel touches his cheek, Dean tries to turn his head and suck two fingers into his mouth; Castiel stops him. "You need rest," he says, and Dean protests, but he lets Castiel carry him to the bed. He pulls Castiel down beside him, their naked limbs tangled together, and in less than two minutes, he's asleep.

Castiel has watched Dean sleep in many motel rooms.

He's watched Dean from across the room. He's watched Dean from beside him in bed, his breath stirring the pillowcase; Dean has been his prisoner and his lover and his caretaker and his friend. Dean has been marked, that whole time, for destruction — for dissolution. At the hands of an archangel, and the demons of Hell, and now, Castiel thinks — now, finally — he might be free.

There's still so much Castiel doesn't understand. If Michael is broadcasting any signals of revelation, he isn't hearing them. He has no desire to return to Heaven and learn what's transpiring there. So he has to hope — that the war of the future is being averted. That Michael is true to his word. That he won't come back seeking Dean.

And the rest of it —

It's strange, the closeness of skin. It's changeable. Twice now, Castiel thinks, he has touched Dean in his sleep and woken him — once with

a gun and once with a prayer. But now they're touching everywhere, and Dean sleeps on.

Castiel catalogues the sensations methodically, unhurried. There's Dean's palm splayed against his chest, his left pectoral, two fingertips on Castiel's collarbone — his hand relaxes with time, curling, but Castiel can still feel his pulse where their skin touches. There's Dean's breath stirring the hair below Castiel's ear, chin jutting into his shoulder; the way his breathing steadies with sleep. There's the swell of his lungs against Castiel's ribs, and Castiel is glad that he is in a form that breathes, too — that their chests can rise and fall in counterpoint, in sync.

There's Dean's hip, slotted against Castiel's, fitted like they were made that way. The soft warmth of his skin there, thin over the bone — and then the muscle of his thigh, flung across Castiel's, anchoring his leg to the mattress. Except that they're touching at the ankle, too, as if Dean felt they had not interlocked enough. Their pulses beat fine against one another.

And then — and then, and *then* — there are Castiel's hands.

For the first few hours, he keeps them perfectly still. He and Dean have shared a bed once before, but they didn't touch; Castiel slept through most of it. Now, Dean falls asleep with one of Castiel's hands on his shoulder, one curled around his ribs — and Castiel must not move to wake him.

Instead, he sinks deep into what he can feel just as he is.

Dean's ribs are faint ridges and valleys under the smooth of his skin. Castiel's fingers slot along them, curl over them, and he thinks of Adam, the first Adam, whose rib became life. Dean's ribs are marked, though — runes in Enochian keeping him safe. Castiel can read them like this, spreading his awareness gently through Dean's chest. Once again, he almost regrets not carving his name.

But no. If he could mark Dean, he wouldn't do it there — not among words written in fear. He would mark Dean's skin with his mouth, with his hands; he would mark him in ecstasy.

The first time he shifts his hands is an accident. It's Dean who stirs, a little past midnight, and Castiel's hand slips — down his shoulder, to his bicep.

He replaces it without thinking. His thumb brushes Dean's jaw on the

way, and he freezes, afraid of waking him — but Dean only sighs and settles closer.

Perhaps he can sleep through a touch after all — when his sleeping mind knows to trust the man beside him.

Slowly, over the hours that follow, Castiel lets his hands move.

It's a discovery, this process. What it's like to have a human sleeping in bed with him — what it's like for a human to *sleep,* this strange and precious phenomenon, this vulnerability. Castiel touches Dean's elbow, and he doesn't respond. He touches Dean's hand, and it curls, unconscious, into his. He touches Dean's spine, counts the knobs of it, and when he reaches the base Dean stirs and nestles closer into his shoulder, but he doesn't wake. So Castiel spreads a palm over his ass, daring, and loves the swell of it — he loves this man, all of him, body and soul.

He touches Dean's thigh. His knee, and the tender place behind it. He can't reach further, not without waking Dean, so he returns to Dean's ribs — his sternum, the hollow beneath it. The softness of his belly.

It's starting to get light out again when Dean shifts, rotates, turning onto his side — twisting the covers around them.

Castiel's hand is trapped against Dean's stomach, Castiel's legs tangled with his legs. So Castiel goes with him, turning onto his side, too. Dean makes a pleased, sleepy sound and settles closer, his back pressed snug against Castiel's chest.

Then his breathing evens again. The hairs at the back of his neck tickle Castiel's nose; Castiel's lips brush against the knobs at the top of Dean's spine.

Dean moves again, and his ass digs against Castiel's hips.

Castiel freezes.

He has not been chasing arousal, but here it is.

Is this how Dean would want Castiel to fuck him? The thought is dizzying. Castiel's erection, hot and heavy suddenly, is trapped against the cleft of Dean's ass; if he moved his hips, if Dean was ready, is this how he would press inside? Would he thrust into Dean with a hand on his belly, pinning him close — with an arm across his chest? Would he kiss the back of Dean's neck as he fucked him — would he set his

teeth to the line of Dean's shoulder when Dean begged?

His whole body feels alive with wanting — with the fire of Dean's skin against his. He feels like a burning star.

Dean shifts again, and it only gets worse.

How long they lie like that, Castiel doesn't know. It might be only minutes, but it feels like hours. Dean keeps moving and settling again, always closer; he mumbles something in his sleep. Slowly, though, the movements become less disjointed, more languid; he shifts his shoulderblades against Castiel's chest and arches his ass into Castiel's hips.

Castiel can tell the moment Dean fully wakes up — the moment it takes Castiel all the strength he has in him not to *thrust*.

There's a beat of stillness. Then Dean rolls his hips again, teasing, and says into the pillow in a warm, sleep-rough voice, "Well, hello."

"Hello, Dean," Castiel agrees. It's about all he can manage.

"Rolling with the blue balls all night, huh?"

"The color of my balls remains within the usual range of variation."

"Talk sexy to me, baby," Dean says like he means it to be deadpan, but it doesn't come out that way, more breathless — he rolls his ass back again, expansive, an invitation. "You wanna — you wanna do something about that usual range of variation?"

Castiel flips him into his belly.

Dean goes easy, the breath gusting out of his lungs, then stuttering back in. He's arching immediately, seeking, and Castiel ruts his dick along the cleft of Dean's ass.

It feels incredible. Friction, finally — *finally* — and Dean gasps another shaking breath, all teasing gone from his voice, and rasps, "Cas — *Cas* — you're gonna fuck me, right? You're gonna — please —"

He's trying to twist backward; Castiel grips his shoulder and pins him back to the bed. He leans close, breath on the skin below Dean's ear, and grinds against Dean's ass again; "Is that what you want?"

"Want you to fucking *rail* me," Dean begs. He's squirming, trying to

open his legs, invite Castiel in — “Want you to — fuck me off the fucking bed —”

“I need to get you ready first, right?”

Dean goes momentarily still. “Fuck. Yeah. There’s, uh — lube in my bag, under the red flannel —”

“Stay,” Castiel tells him, almost absently, levering himself off the bed. He finds the bottle he needs in Dean’s duffel, and when he turns back, Dean’s just as he left him, picture perfect — his head turned to the side to watch Castiel, eyes dazed with lust, muscles trembling.

Castiel returns to the bed. He bends close over the back of Dean’s neck before he murmurs, “Good,” and he’s rewarded by Dean shuddering and closing his eyes. Castiel kisses his skin, just below the hairline; then he turns Dean over, bodily, and kisses him again on the mouth. Somewhere in the process Dean gets his legs open, splayed to each side, so Castiel kneels between them, nudges them wider. Dean’s eyes are half-lidded, his dick flushed dark and hard.

“Tell me what to do,” Castiel commands.

And Dean does — halting at times, his voice cracking, but he starts talking and doesn’t stop. Castiel follows his instructions, applying lubricant to his fingers — “you have massive fucking hands, Cas, Jesus, want ‘em *everywhere”* — and finding the tight bud of muscle that makes Dean shiver, spread his legs and cant his hips and beg, *“Please —”*

Castiel circles it twice, watching Dean bite his lower lip and strain for contact. He loves this, loves Dean like this, wide-open and needy — he circles once more, teasing, just to make Dean squirm and say, *“Cas,”* then presses his finger, in one steady movement, inside.

Dean’s mouth stutters open in a silent gasp.

With his free hand, Castiel touches Dean’s lower lip — presses it to his teeth, watching it pink and swell, then hooks a fingertip inside to touch the flat of his tongue. Dean tries to close his mouth and suck on it, but Castiel grips his chin, refusing; “Keep talking.”

“Fuck, Cas,” Dean breathes. “Fuck. Okay. Can you — move?”

Castiel slides his finger experimentally out, then back in.

This time, he feels his fingertip brush over something that sends shocks of electricity up Dean's spine.

Dean arches and *moans,* and arousal slams through Castiel at the sight; makes him jerk his wrist, hitting that spot again, harder. Again, Dean makes a guttural sound, writhing, so Castiel does it a third time, and Dean flings his head back, throat bare and exposed and gleaming with sweat. Castiel cups a hand around it, possessive, his thumb on the pulse beneath Dean's jaw.

It's fluttering fast and shallow. "Can you," Dean breathes, "can you add another finger?"

Castiel does.

He sits back to find the lube among the sheets and squirt more onto his right hand. He stays there, though, studying Dean's flushed chest, the minute reactions on his face as Castiel slides his fingers back in.

He can feel how Dean stretches to take it. He looks down to watch one knuckle disappearing, then the next, and imagines his dick doing this — how wide Dean will need to stretch, how tight it will feel. He pulls Dean's ass cheek open wider with one thumb and watches his fingers pump in, out; when he releases it, the mark of his thumb remains, white and then flushing pink. Fascinated, Castiel does it again, palming Dean's whole ass cheek this time and squeezing; he can see his handprint, briefly, when he lets go.

"Cas," Dean croaks, *"please,"* and Castiel realizes he's stopped moving; Dean's body is arched in the agony of anticipation, Castiel's fingers buried deep inside his ass.

He's beautiful. Castiel could look at him like this forever.

"Please what?" he asks, voice low.

"Please — more," Dean manages. He twists his hips slightly, as if for purchase; "please —"

Castiel tries rotating his fingers.

Dean cries out.

Castiel stops instantly, going still. But Dean is reaching down with desperate hands, trembling touches, urging him on; "Please, Cas. Please, faster, please, harder, please —"

His dick looks achingly hard; it's dripping precome at the tip, and Castiel wants to put his mouth on it, wants to see how loud he could make Dean shout, but he doesn't think Dean would be able to last. He drags his fingers out instead, slow, tantalizing — Dean whines his name — and then he takes mercy and slams them back in.

Dean's body nearly jolts out of the bed. And then it does, hips rising, insistent — he chases Castiel's fingers, works himself against them. Castiel relents and kneads in and out, in and out; when he scissors his fingers, Dean cries out again, then says, "I'm ready — I'm fucking ready, Cas, need you —"

Castiel pulls his hand free. He surges up to kiss Dean, pressing their chests together, and Dean's legs wrap around his hips; Dean's levering himself off the bed, fitting his ass to Castiel's cock, working for contact. At the same time, he breathes into Castiel's mouth, "Cas — what you said yesterday —"

Castiel nips his lower lip, distracted. "Which thing I said?"

"About — how people like to use me. And, and discard me. I think that's what you said."

Castiel pulls back.

Dean doesn't let him go, not all the way. His ankles are locked around Castiel's body, holding him close — he looks nervous, but his pupils are still wide and dark with arousal, his body is still straining for Castiel's.

"I wouldn't," Castiel promises. He touches Dean's cheek. "I would never. I — I'm sorry I —"

Dean bites his lip. "What if," he interrupts, and his cheeks are bright; "what if — I like feeling used?"

His eyes are tense, some mixture of hopeful and worried, all of it hazed with desire. Castiel palms his hip, strokes a thumb over the ridge of it. "What are you asking, Dean?"

Again, Dean's body flexes into Castiel's touch. His eyes are half-lidded. "I mean — what if I wanted you to — fucking, fucking manhandle me. To fucking — pin me down and take what you want, just *take* it, is that — would that be fucking pathetic? Do you —"

Castiel covers his mouth with a hand to shut him up.

Dean blinks up at him, raw and wanting. His emotions are tangled and easy to read, right there on the surface, on the verge of a prayer — lust and shame and a craving for approval, a craving for *Castiel;* to be loved, to be wanted, exactly as he is.

Castiel removes his hand. He kisses Dean, soft on the lips; then he draws back a breath, far enough to thrust his clean fingers into Dean's mouth — deep, like Dean's been begging for. Deep enough for Dean to latch onto and *suck,* and he does; deep enough for Dean's throat and his tongue to work against them, greedy, like it's Castiel's cock in his mouth.

With his other hand, he palms Dean's own dick. Thumbs the head, then rings his fingers around the base and squeezes, lightly; Dean goes absolutely still.

Castiel bends low to his ear. He asks, "May I use you and keep you?"

"Fuck," Dean breathes, muffled around Castiel's fingers, and Castiel feels the blood pulse in his dick. "Yeah. Fuck. Yes."

Castiel frees his hand, punching a small bereft sound out of Dean's chest; it cuts off quickly when Castiel squeezes the back of his neck instead. "On your knees."

Dean exhales a shaky breath.

Then he obeys — releasing the grip of his thighs around Castiel's waist. Castiel guides him by the hip, turning, settling — kneeling on the bed, with Castiel behind him.

He is beautiful — the clean shapes of his shoulderblades; his arms and the lean muscles of his back and his naked thighs.

Castiel moves close. His cock bumps the small of Dean's back, presses lengthwise against it, and Dean starts, "Cas, are you gonna —" before Castiel shuts him up with a hand on his dick — a long, demanding stroke. With his other hand, he squeezes the column of Dean's throat, then plunges a pair of fingers once again into his mouth.

Dean makes a wrecked, needy sound and tips his head back onto Castiel's shoulder. He curls his tongue around Castiel's fingers and quivers when Castiel jacks him again, slow; his body is like a live wire. Castiel could play it as he pleases — watch Dean come undone — but no. Dean made a request.

He doesn't hold back his strength when he grips Dean's shoulder — when he presses Dean down into the bed.

Dean hitches a gasp, immediately canting his hips, and Castiel adjusts his thighs wider. He drags a thumb over the puffed round rim of Dean's asshole, dipping it briefly inside, then releases him and sits back.

If Dean was beautiful before, like this he's — he's obscene.

Castiel can imagine it in stained glass — the faithless man on his knees. He has seen cathedral windows, mankind's greatest works of devotion, but he has never seen anything as splendid as Dean. It could be a triptych, he thinks. Dean would be demure on one side, kneeling upright — head bowed, his palms on his thighs. On the other, like this — his ass in the air and face pressed to the pillow, hands twisting the sheets.

In the center —

Castiel squirts lube into his palm. He applies it to his dick, generous, then twists swift fingers into Dean's ass one more time to make sure he's still loose and open. Dean gasps, trying to ride back into the touch, but he stills himself when Castiel grasps his hip. "Are you ready?"

Dean mumbles something into the pillow that sounds like, *"Cas, if you don't fuck me right now I'm gonna fucking die."*

"I wouldn't want that," Castiel agrees, and nudges himself into place.

He drives in slowly.

It feels incredible. It feels more than incredible; it feels like nothing he's ever imagined. It feels — tight, breathtakingly tight, and hot, and — it feels like *Dean,* Dean all around him, Dean trembling against him, wanting him, begging for more.

Castiel bottoms out. He stays there for a moment, hands clenched on Dean's hips for balance, feeling brighter than the sun; then, because Dean asked Castiel to fuck him, he does.

He leans over Dean, first. He remembers how Dean reacted when Castiel squeezed the back of his neck, before, so he does it again — pinning him, this time, to the bed. With his other hand, he grips Dean's thigh, one thumb riding under Dean's ass cheek, fingers at the

crease of his hip — and he holds Dean there like iron while he drags his cock out — thrusts back in.

The sound Dean makes is the most intoxicating thing Castiel has ever heard. The sound Dean makes is a prayer.

Castiel *wants;* wants Dean just like this, forever. Bowed in supplication and spilling over with need, with gratitude. He wants to punch those noises out of Dean until he's heard every one in his store — until Dean's *his,* completely. Until Castiel is his whole world.

He fucks into Dean hard enough to flatten him to the bed.

His grip on Dean's body is strong, though, unyielding, holding him in place; the motel bed headboard smacks against the wall. Dean cries out, muscles shivering with overwhelmed pleasure, and Castiel does it again. Again. Again —

He's making a wreck out of Dean — breath sobbing in and out over his teeth, his cock dripping precome; struggling to open his thighs even wider, to take Castiel deeper. His prayers spilling everywhere, but they're not *please* anymore; they're *thank you, thank you.* They're Castiel's name — always Castiel's name.

Castiel needs him closer.

When he pulls Dean upright, Dean goes, like a rag doll — pliant in Castiel's arms. He cants his hips, though, as Castiel draws him back down onto his cock — his back pressed to Castiel's chest, his legs straddling Castiel's thighs.

"Wait," Castiel murmurs into his skin.

There's a mirror. Above the dresser, on the other side of the room — there's a mirror on the wall.

Castiel rotates Dean without slipping out of him. He keeps his cock buried deep, rolling it once, teasing; he holds Dean still with arms across his stomach, his chest. It's like he imagined, Dean snug against him in the night; it's so much better. "Look at yourself," he commands.

Dean's eyes blink slowly open.

This is the center panel of his cathedral window, Castiel thinks. This view is worthy of art.

He's beautiful, with green eyes. Even in the dim of the motel room, Castiel can see their color; the way they're hazed with pleasure, the way Dean's gaze is unmoored. His chest is bare and lovely, flushed pink, ribs arched; Castiel thumbs his nipple, then pulls it to make it sting. He sees Dean's cock jerk in the mirror, sees his lips part, and he wants to see his own cock, too — wants to see Dean sinking down onto it, wants to watch his face as he does.

It's easy, to lever Dean up — to draw him back down.

Dean throws his head back, baring his throat. His hair brushes Castiel's shoulder. Before Castiel can kiss his skin, though, lick a stripe down his Adam's apple, bite his collarbone, Dean's lifting his face again. He's watching the mirror, hungry, as he slides off of Castiel's cock again — as he rides back down.

A prayer of his own punches out of Castiel's chest.

It rattles the cups on the nightstand, makes the TV briefly fuzz static and shut off.

"Fuck," says Dean. He gyrates his hips, grinding his ass obscenely into Castiel's lap; "Fuck. You like that? Me riding you? F — fucking myself on your cock?"

Castiel presses his mouth to the hinge of Dean's jaw. "Yes." He says it again, in his true voice, *Yes,* and it's a wonder he can keep it low enough to only rumble the air around them, to gently vibrate the delicate bones of Dean's inner ear.

"Oh, fuck," says Dean. "Fuck. Do that again."

So Castiel does.

He prays to Dean, as Dean rides him. *You are so beautiful.* He fills the air with it, fills Dean's chest; *If I do not love you, I do not know what love is.* He marvels at the way his voice unhitches Dean from gravity, any gravity but Castiel — *Dean. Dean —*

Dean's breath is coming fast and ragged, his hips moving wild. He nearly falls forward, and Castiel catches him; Dean's human muscles are giving out. "Cas," he breathes, "touch me. Please, please will you —"

Castiel wraps a hand around his cock.

The moan Dean makes is long and shuddering, obscene. He goes perfectly still.

So Castiel takes over. Thrusting up into Dean, stroking his cock in time — flicking a thumb over the head, rolling fingers underneath his balls, squeezing the base when he gets too close. He presses his palm to Dean's stomach, his chest, making the blood rise there and fade — never enough to bruise. Just enough to paint Dean with his handprints, to watch the way Dean's eyes track them in the mirror, through the daze of overstimulation — the way with each one his breath goes more ragged, the movement of his hips more urgent, his ass tighter around Castiel's cock.

Finally, Dean throws his head back again; back to where Castiel can kiss him, hungry, devouring the taste of Dean's mouth, the desperate puffs of air from his lungs. "Cas," he pants finally, "Cas, will you mark me? Will you leave something I can —"

Castiel wraps his arm around Dean's chest. He grips Dean's shoulder, tight.

And he pours feeling into it, through the palm of his hand — his love and his lust and his gratitude, his desire. The way Dean makes him feel like a comet, makes him feel like a supernova; the way Dean could fuse atoms, could reorder the universe, by force of his smile. He holds on tight and he burns and burns and Dean clenches around him — Dean makes a soft cry —

And he's coming, they're both coming, Castiel pumping deep into Dean's ass, Dean striping white across Castiel's hand, his thighs.

It takes them several minutes to come down.

Castiel doesn't want to come down. He feels holy; he feels divine. He rolls lingering thrusts into Dean's body as his erection fades, feeling the new slick inside; he touches Dean's come with his fingers and paints it across Dean's belly, his thighs. Eventually, he releases Dean's shoulder, and his handprint there is raised and pink, like the scar tissue of an old burn. He traces it, fascinated, while Dean watches in the mirror — body heavy and languid against Castiel's, head resting on his shoulder.

"Does it hurt?" Castiel asks softly.

His words seem to call Dean back from a great distance. He turns his face into Castiel's neck, nuzzling his skin. "No." A hesitation, and then

he adds, “Not really.”

Worry clenches in Castiel’s chest. “Do you like it? I can heal it, if you don’t want —”

Dean bites his skin, lightly. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

There’s cleanup to deal with, after they finally unseal themselves; after Dean levers himself up on his knees with a groan and Castiel’s cock slips free. There’s cleanup to deal with, but they lounge in the sheets instead, away from the wet spot, even though Dean points out he’s just making a new one. Castiel keeps tracing the mark on his shoulder, can’t help himself; he likes how it makes Dean shiver.

“You’re *sure* you want this?” he asks, for the third or fourth time, because it seems too good to be true — his brand on Dean’s skin. Dean asking for it, begging for it, like he took Castiel at his word — *use me and keep me.* Like he means it, for good.

“For the last time,” Dean says, but his smile belies his impatient tone; then he rolls over and looks at Castiel properly, face more serious. “It’s just — he said he was going to mark me, you know? Mark his claim, for later. I don’t want his. I want yours.”

Castiel feels breathless. He fits his hand, again, to the mark, even as he says, “If you change your mind —”

“I’ll tell you.” Dean cups his hand over Castiel’s. “‘Cause you’re gonna be here. Right?”

He says it casually, but there’s a sharpness in his eyes when they seek out Castiel’s. And Castiel could equivocate; he could point out that things might come up. His commander might need him. That Dean could always pray to him, even if he wasn’t here; that he would come. Instead he says, “Yes. If you’ll have me.”

Dean nods, apparently satisfied. Then a sudden laugh catches on the corner of his mouth; he slumps back in the bed and puts a hand over his face. “We are *not* telling people how I got it, though.”

Castiel smiles. “What are we telling them, then? That you begged an angel of the Lord to brand your skin during — a friendly game of pool?”

Dean turns to stare at him.

Castiel looks back, mild.

“You made a joke,” Dean says finally. “Don’t do that. I can’t believe you made a fucking joke. Is this your first one?”

“I believe so.”

“You have to make more, then. That one was awful. Besides, pool’s never friendly. It’s always angry or sexy. Or both.”

“You’ll have to teach me.”

Dean’s eyes glaze for a moment with interest. Then he shakes his head; to dispel the image forming there, Castiel understands. Not a refusal. He opens his mouth to say something else, but it’s cut off, abruptly, when a buzzing sounds from across the room.

Dean’s cell phone — still in the pocket of his jeans from yesterday, heaped in the door to the bathroom. The vibration rattles against his keys, and Dean startles, stares with hollow eyes for one ring — another — before he scrambles, naked, to retrieve it.

Castiel follows him. They’re strange things, naked human bodies, outside of the passions of sex; his dick swings between his legs, bumping his thighs. Dean’s does the same, though, and he still looks beautiful, so Castiel supposes it’s all right.

Dean’s got his phone out of his pocket. He’s looking at the screen on the front, not moving to answer it; he sits with a small, abrupt thump on the rug.

There’s no space beside him, so Castiel sits behind him — places his chin on Dean’s shoulder. The caller ID on the phone says, *Dad.*

It buzzes one more time before it stops. Dean just holds it there, staring, so Castiel wraps arms around his torso, pulling him close; he kisses the place where Dean’s neck meets his shoulder and holds him and waits.

After a minute, maybe two, the phone makes another buzz, a truncated one; *1 New Text Message,* the screen says.

Dean flips it open. His hands are shaking, Castiel notices, although he tries to hide it.

Just so u know, the message says. *He wouldn’t take me. I offered myself*

100 times before I gave him u.

Dean's hands shake harder. The phone slips out of them and falls to the floor, and he doesn't retrieve it.

"Are you all right?" Castiel asks after a long moment. It seems like a stupid question, but it also seems like the question humans ask at moments like these.

Dean laughs, short and harsh. "What, with my dad — with my dad —"

"Attempting to sacrifice you to save his third, secret, and apparently favorite son, yes."

He sees his words land. Dean swallows, hard, but the shaking stops, as if he needed to hear the betrayal out loud. "No," he says after a long moment, voice hoarse. "No, I'm not all right."

"Good." Castiel doesn't quite know how to say, *I was afraid you would be. I was afraid you'd tell me he made the right call.* "I want to kill him," he adds, confiding. "I wanted to at the house. At the restaurant. I want to now. I will, if you wish it."

It takes longer than he expects for Dean to shake his head no.

Before either of them can speak, though, the phone on the floor buzzes again.

Dean picks it up. There's another text message. *Are u going 2 tell Sam?*

That makes Dean snort a bitter laugh. "About what?" he asks the piece of plastic standing in for his father. "About our little brother? About how I'm the sexiest angel condom — ribbed *and* flavored? About how he was — he was right about you?"

His voice breaks on the last question, and Castiel holds him tighter. Reaches for the phone in his fingers and closes it — tosses it gently across the room. Dean's arms come up to wrap around Castiel's, hugging his own torso, "Not like," he says after a moment, "not like Sammy's talking to me anyway."

"I suspect that might change," Castiel points out, with his lips to Dean's skin. "If you wanted it to."

Dean goes still. "I can't tell him about this shit," he says, after a long moment. "It — he'd —"

He stops again. Castiel kisses his shoulder, the mark there, the heart of his own palm, and Dean shivers. “Maybe,” he concedes, after a while. Then, with a strain on his voice: “You’d come with me?”

“Anywhere.”

That makes Dean’s ribs tense, then gust out a small sigh. They sit for a while like that, rocking gently, and eventually Dean asks, “Do you think I’m still going to Hell?”

Castiel doesn’t know how much they’ve changed the story.

Michael said *Save Dean Winchester,* though, and Castiel has to think this is what he meant. From his fate, from his father, from the destiny laid out before him — *It is one thing to carry one’s family tragedy to its natural end,* Michael said. *It is another to inflict it on someone else.*

If Dean is Michael’s vessel, pressed into his role in the family tragedy, then the other part —

No. Castiel will think about that if he has to, and not before.

Besides, it isn’t only a question of how much they’ve changed the story. It’s a matter of continuing to change it, every day. “No,” he tells Dean, “I don’t. But if I’m wrong, I’ll follow you there, too. I’ll pull you back out.”

For a long moment, Dean is very still in his arms.

Then he snorts a laugh. It’s sudden, ungraceful; it makes Castiel want to kiss him. He giggles again. “All right, Casanova,” he says. “You wanna maybe start by following me to breakfast?”

Castiel feels a bubble of lightness inside his chest. It expands and expands, fizzing in his veins, curving his mouth up at the corners; this, he thinks, must be happiness.

He tucks his smile into Dean’s neck. “Yes.”

Dean is walking gingerly when they get dressed and make their way out to the car, like he’s still feeling the effects of their earlier activities. Castiel watches him, fascinated, and probably takes too long to reach out a hand in healing; when he does, though, Dean slaps it away. “Don’t you fucking dare,” he growls, and then, dropping into

prayer: *Wanna feel you all day.*

They're standing in the parking lot. Castiel shouldn't press him back and kiss him against the Impala's warm metal; shouldn't, and he doesn't, but he lets his eyes drop to Dean's mouth long enough to make him shiver.

And he thinks about it, as Dean drives them across town, as Dean holds the door for him at the diner; about the things Dean's layers of clothing conceal. The shape of his body, maybe, and the fragility of it; the gun tucked into his waistband and the knife in his boot and the fears he carries like weapons in his belly. Today, those fears seem distant. Today, Dean's clothes are hiding the handprint on his shoulder where Castiel marked him. The tenderness between his legs where Castiel fucked him. They do nothing to hide the way Dean's eyes always turn to Castiel; the giddy hunger on his face.

The menus the waiter hands them are enormous and laminated, spiral-bound, and Dean reads his twice before ordering the breakfast special. Castiel watches where his eyes linger; he asks for the blueberry pancakes and eats one for form's sake before passing the plate with the other two to Dean.

He watches Dean eat. He doesn't think Dean always had enough to eat, as a child; he knows he didn't have ice cream. Not unless he earned the money for it himself.

"You're gonna make me fat," Dean says around a mouthful, chewing.

"Good," Castiel agrees.

When he asks, Dean describes the flavors to him — the blueberries with their occasional pop of tartness, the rich sweetness of maple syrup. "It's the textures though, too," he adds, and as he talks Castiel thinks back to the way the syrup soaked into his pancake, the fluffiness Dean's describing and the way it's interrupted by gooey islands of berry. He listens and considers the molecules lingering on his tongue, the saccharides and aldehydes, a complex jumble of carbon and hydrogen and oxygen, and when Dean offers a bite on the end of his fork and Castiel takes it, he finds he can taste some of what Dean's telling him; that Dean's words, Dean's pleasure, are tied up in those formulas too.

It's not unlike a twine ball, once you start tracing the strands.

He says as much to Dean, and Dean turns shy and a little tentative

before he asks, “You know. We’re not that far from the Minnesota one, if you still wanted to go — I know you’ve already been to see it, but —”

“Yes,” Castiel says. “Yes, let’s.”

They talk of serious things, again, in the car. Dean asks, shyly, what it was like, dying on Michael’s lance, and Castiel tries to explain; after a few minutes, he realizes that Dean’s really asking whether he’s better — all the way better — and the answer is yes. His wings and his powers are intact, though he doesn't think that's quite what Dean's asking; he thinks Dean's more concerned about *Cas.*

“I suppose we’re fortunate,” he adds, “that he decided to kill me. It must have allowed the other Michael to find us.”

Dean shakes his head, though. “No. That’s not how —”

He breaks off, and Castiel looks at him, questioning.

“He followed us through the rain,” Dean says slowly. “I didn’t — I dunno how I know that, he just — I could just *tell.* He was watching us the whole time, he was so mad at my dad, but he didn’t wanna — he wasn’t gonna try and possess me until he had to.”

“He told you that?”

Again, Dean shakes his head. “I just — knew.”

Castiel frowns. “How did he follow us, though?” He’d thought the plan was a good one, even with the rain; he wouldn’t have proposed it if he thought it would fail. Michael’s hand on the town of Windom is evidence enough of how angels can hide in plain sight; what did Castiel get wrong?

“I think,” says Dean. “I think it was because I was — having fun.”

A singular person in a singular place; that’s what Castiel cautioned Dean against. He didn’t think there were any angels attuned enough to human emotion to detect its singularities, too.

He wonders what’s happening right now in Heaven. It’s going to be a strange new world.

“Wait,” says Dean suddenly, horrified. “You don’t think he could’ve —

you don't think he was — watching this morning?"

Castiel touches the back of Dean's neck. A profound feeling of well-being washes over him — of smugness. "If he was," he points out, "then he knows that you're mine."

The Minnesota twine ball is the oldest twine ball.

A man named Francis Johnson started it in 1950. He wound some twine around his fingers, one chilly night in March; then he kept winding it, for twenty-nine years. It isn't the first twine ball, Castiel supposes; farmers have wound twine around their fingers for as long as twine and farmers have existed. But Francis Johnson might have been the first to look at the little thing he'd made and think, *This. This is my life's work.* He might have been the first to gaze on an insignificant, everyday thing and by his gaze make it extraordinary.

"He finished it the year I was born," Dean says, his fingers on the plaque, under: *1979.* Then he adds, "I always liked this one. The Kansas one's my favorite, but this one has — I dunno —"

"Gravitas," Castiel suggests. It's nearly a perfect sphere; it seems to have its own light, almost, glowing soft in the dark of the gazebo. The square knots connecting each length of twine to the next are uniform, the work of a single pair of practiced hands; its surface looks gnarled like those fingers must have been.

"It feels like," says Dean, "it's what it was *meant* to be. You know? It *was* the biggest one in the world, when he finished. But Cawker City kept going with theirs even after the guy who started it died, they just invited everyone to help, and — I dunno. They're just — different."

"One of them is a story with an ending," Castiel agrees. "The other — they decided the story had no ending. That it was everyone's; that it could go on as long as anyone wanted to tell it."

Dean shivers. Castiel doesn't think it's from cold; the leaves are turning, but the day is still warm. "I don't want to go to the Wisconsin one," he says, suddenly. "Not right now. I like that guy, but he's — intense."

Castel thinks back to the man who believes angels are guiding him; he knows what Dean means. "Where to, then?"

It feels like a loaded question. It feels like a universe worth of possibilities; the phone in Dean's pocket keeps buzzing sporadically, his father trying to contact him, but he hasn't moved to answer.

Dean turns to lean back against the railing and makes a show of thinking about it. "Well," he says slowly, "the giant corn gazebo isn't far. We could go to the world's largest lutefisk. Or the world's largest crow. Or the world's largest Paul Bunyan. There's a guy down in Jasper who collects windmills, I always liked that place —"

"Let's go there," Castiel says. His heart is swelling; Dean is grinning at him. Like he loves nothing more than taking Castiel to roadside attractions. Like he'd gladly spend forever observing giant fiberglass sculptures with an angel by his side. Like this is his twine ball, his life's work; Castiel isn't sure which of them is wrapped around the other's fingers.

Maybe it's both. He finds he doesn't care. He says, "Let's go to all of them."

Chapter End Notes

OKAY OKAY. The thing is done. Some things to say:

Thanks so much to Kasia, for whom I wrote it, and whose reactions sustained me along the way; to Natalie, whose terrifying genius brain deserves part credit/blame for everything I write, and who always calls out my most batshit choices while somehow goading me to even greater heights of batshittery; to destielamv for their incredible art (GO LOOK if you haven't); to Cass and Remmy and all of you who have commented along the way. You guys rock. Thank you.

NO thanks to my keyboard, which at various points in this fic stopped typing the letter "i" and then started typing double spaces every time I tried to just do one. So. If you see typos of that ilk, send it some stinkeye.

If you want to share on tumblr, I have a masterpost of sorts over there.

I hope you enjoyed!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!